



# DEVIANT DESCENDANTS



BELLE MALORY

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## CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)  
[Chapter 1](#)  
[Chapter 2](#)  
[Chapter 3](#)  
[Chapter 4](#)  
[Chapter 5](#)  
[Chapter 6](#)  
[Chapter 7](#)  
[Chapter 8](#)  
[Chapter 9](#)  
[Chapter 10](#)  
[Chapter 11](#)  
[Chapter 12](#)  
[Chapter 13](#)  
[Chapter 14](#)  
[Chapter 15](#)  
[Chapter 16](#)  
[Chapter 17](#)  
[Chapter 18](#)  
[Chapter 19](#)  
[Chapter 20](#)  
[Chapter 21](#)  
[Chapter 22](#)  
[Chapter 23](#)  
[Chapter 24](#)  
[Chapter 25](#)  
[Chapter 26](#)  
[Chapter 27](#)  
[Chapter 28](#)  
[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)

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KDP ISBN: 9798639585999

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Cover by Christian Bentulan

## PROLOGUE

“AS PROMISED, FIFTY GOLDEN WOTS.”

Madam Elga, the Inky Snake’s barkeep, greedily tightened her gnarled fingers around the change purse. She loosened the drawstring to count the coins inside, her weathered skin and yellowed eyes brightening.

To Petra, it was only money. A small price to pay considering what she was about to receive in return.

She lowered the hood of her velvet robe and inspected the portal in the upstairs mirror. Unlike others she’d seen, this one swirled in a cloud of blue mist and gave off sparks of electric magic.

“Anyone can pass through?”

Elga only had one front tooth, which she used to chew the edge of a coin. “Aye,” she replied in a throaty voice. “Many a hollowed prisoner ’as slipped through unscathed.”

“Even those bound by oath?”

“If you don’t believe me,” Elga gestured for Petra to step forward, “find out for yourself.”

This could be it—her way *out*. At least, she hoped so. She remained optimistically cautious. Over the years, she had searched high and low for an escape, constantly met with disappointment.

This time felt different.

*Possible.*

A portal that allowed travelers to pass through no matter what magic was attached to them. A portal that could transport her out of the Underworld. A portal that could change her fate...Petra wasn't one to show emotion, but she swallowed as she stepped toward the looming portal, trying to keep her legs steady.

"Stop there."

The familiar voice brought all the loudness of a train screeching to a halt. Gods—not her!—and at a moment like this, too. She groaned at the irony.

"As always, sister, your timing is impeccable." She spoke the words through clenched teeth, addressing Selena without bothering to turn around.

"Petra, do not step one foot into that portal."

She considered leaping for it, just to avoid this conversation. But the seriousness of Selena's tone made her curious. "Humor me. Why shouldn't I?"

"Because you're bound to this world by oath. The moment you go inside it, the portal will electrocute you and spit you out beneath the River Styx."

*No.*

Petra clenched her hands into fists.

She slowly circled around, noticing how squirmish Elga had become. Well, well. She couldn't say she was surprised by the barkeep's deception. Only disappointed. She hoped this was the real deal.

"I've a mind to turn you into a toad, madam." She snatched the change purse out of Elga's hands. "A slimy, wart-covered toad I can squash under the heel of my boot."

Elga stepped back, visibly trembling. "I-I had no idea. I swear!"

Every wretched soul in the Underworld knew better than to risk her wrath. The stuttering barkeep obviously didn't plan on Petra surviving,

which meant nothing for her to worry about.

She definitely had something to worry about *now*.

Sensing what was coming, Selena stepped between the pair of them. To Elga, she said, “Go now. Fetch us some wine. We’ll find a table downstairs.”

Elga’s bulbous eyes rounded on Selena as if she were her savior, nodding gratefully as she scurried toward the stairs. Petra’s nose twitched. Oh, Selena. Always the white swan to her black one. Ever the angel of hell, prancing around sprinkling glitter over blood and sin as if it might make this shithole prettier. Some things *never* changed.

“*Somnum mortis*.”

Elga fell flat on her face, her body a sack of deadweight against the wooden floor.

Selena’s shoulder’s slumped. She let out a small, wistful sigh. “Was that necessary?”

“Of course, it was.”

Petra’s lips curved up on one side. The barkeep wasn’t dead, only in a temporary sleep paralysis, but Selena didn’t have to know that. And Petra didn’t tell her either. She was enjoying her sister’s look of horror too much. More importantly, she refused to let *anyone* think she didn’t have a backbone. She had a tarnished reputation, after all, and she wanted to keep it that way.

Lifting the skirt of her robe to step over Elga, Petra squared her shoulders and left the room, heading back down the twisty wooden staircase. “Come along, sister,” she called over her shoulder. “We are perfectly capable of fetching our own wine.”

“Honestly.” Selena followed her down the creaky steps, her voice full of regret. “That was harsh.”

“She deserved worse.” Like the actual death Selena believed she had gotten.



The hum of voices picked up as they rounded the corner. Dozens of patrons were visiting the main hall at this late hour—the worst sort, too. Goblins, dark mages, and other awful creatures filled the tables, mugs of frothy ale in their hands.

Without hesitating, Petra went back behind the bar and dug through Elga's shelves until she found the most expensive, unopened bottle of red she could find. Satisfied, she unscrewed the cork and poured two glasses full. It didn't matter what her sister wanted to talk about—she would need wine to get through it.

The two of them found a table in the back, away from prying ears, and sat down. Selena twisted one of her blonde curls warily, looking like a sheep who wandered into a lion's den. She didn't belong in the Underworld, much less this unsavory tavern, and it was utterly apparent. By contrast, Petra thought she fit in just fine. Between her sharp features and the fierceness in her gaze, she gave off stay-the-hell-away vibes that suited her nicely.

“Well?” Petra swirled the wine around in her glass. “How's dear old Dad these days?”

Thomas Vane was the one person they both despised since kidnapped and cursed both of their daughters. Their mutual hate for him was the only thing they shared in common. Apart from that, the two of them were as different as night and day.

Selena shrugged. “Busy carrying out orders for the king.”

“Don't you mean he's giving his own orders and convincing the king they're his ideas?”

Selena snorted at the blunt description. “We know our father well, don't we?”

“All too well.”

Thomas was the hollowed king's most trusted advisor. He used his power from the Hollowed Council to trap them here.

Over the years, Selena had grown to accept her role, acquiring power and status as the Royal Clairvoyant. She settled down, remarried, and she even had more children. But Petra had never felt at home in this world. The hazy purple sun never captivated her the way it did some mages. She missed the blistering heat from Summer Island, where she'd grown up. And she missed having control over her own life.

"So..." Petra said, tapping the rim of her glass. Conversations with her sister had always proven awkward. "How's life in the Hollowed Castle?"

"Why not come back and find out for yourself?"

She shuddered. "No, thanks."

After countless years of torturing prisoners with her mind magic, she wished to never step foot in the Hollowed Castle again. Of course, life wasn't much better now. She still used her mind magic to recruit hollowed soldiers from the city, but at least that work wasn't as draining. Then there was the added bonus of getting away from privileged aristocrats and Hollowed Council members.

"I miss having you around." Selena offered a tentative smile. "There's no one else to complain about Father with me."

If Petra was the eye-rolling sort, she would have done so by now. "What's this really about?"

Selena shook her head. "You were never one for small talk, were you? I suppose it's the Ares blood. Your sort has always been impatient."

"Or perhaps I've never cared to be friendly with the woman who stole the father of my child," she replied dryly, slicing into Selena with a sharp gaze.

Selena frowned. "I'm also your *sister*," she said, as if that word meant something. "Honestly, Petra, we've been over this dozens of times. I didn't know about you when I met Daniel."

That much was half-true. Selena didn't know they were sisters, but she sure as hell knew Daniel had been dating her. Everyone did.

“You should move on to the point of this meeting.” Petra smiled coolly, subtly letting her sister know that her feelings would never change.

“Fine,” Selena sighed. “If that’s how you want to do this—”

“I do.”

Selena’s frown deepened. “You can’t leave the Underworld. Whether you find a portal that allows you passage or not, you must stay because... they’re coming.”

Petra arched a brow. “Who’s coming?”

“Our daughters.”

She went still, holding her breath. “You’ve seen a vision of this?”

Selena nodded, her expression serious.

Petra tightened her grip around the stem of her glass, trying to make sense of it. She learned long ago not to underestimate Selena’s visions. They were always shockingly accurate. “*Both* of them?”

Again, Selena nodded.

On Zeus’s grave—why the Underworld of all places? This was no place for two cursed teenagers in a deathmatch.

“Why does it matter if I’m here?” Petra caught the frantic edge in her own voice. She was usually adept at keeping it together. But anything involving Sheridan brought her emotions to the forefront.

“They need you. You’re a catalyst—you help them in some way. The details are fuzzy, but they *will* need you.”

“You realize as soon as I set eyes on your daughter, she’s dead, don’t you?”

Selena calmly sipped her wine. “You won’t kill her.”

“That’s a bit delusional, even for you.”

“You won’t. Something turned over within you when you saw Sheridan again. The renewal of that bond is opening your heart. Riley’s death would hurt Sheridan, and you won’t put her through the loss.”

Petra snorted. “Come now, sister. You know me better than that.”

“The two of them once had the relationship you and I should’ve had. Deep down, you care. And Sheridan has been through enough already. They both have.”

“Oh, for Apollo’s sake.” Her lip twitched. “Are you saying you *saw* me allowing her to live?”

Selena nodded.

If that was true, it remained to be seen. She wouldn’t take Selena’s word on it, not while she had ulterior motives for saying so.

“Notify me when they arrive.” Selena stood up. “I’m not sure what role I have to play, but I would like to help too.”

“Oh, I will,” Petra smiled wickedly. She planned to send Selena’s daughter’s corpse to her in a body bag. A delightful notification, if there ever was one.

Selena drew the hood of her robe back in place, frowning. “We don’t have to be enemies, you know. We never did.”

“Who knows what might have been,” Petra said sarcastically. “If only we hadn’t fallen for the same mage.”

The same *stupid, worthless* mage.

“All the same, you know where to find me.” Petra flinched as Selena briefly touched her shoulder. Just as quickly, she removed her hand, her eyes tightening with disappointment. “Take care of yourself, sister.”

## ❧ I ❧

*ONE OF TWO—BOTH FUTURES, BLEAK. SHE IS STRONG, AND YOU ARE weak. Like two broken halves to a whole, you must break some more, to pay the toll.*

The woman from Twilight Island's prophecy repeated inside my head, her voice a harrowing echo that wouldn't stop. Over and over again, I heard those words. Break some more. Pay the toll. What did it all *mean*?

I was so focused on deciphering its meaning that I didn't pay attention to my surroundings. Or the sharp voices coming from behind.

The blow came hard on my right side, and I jerked forward. Books and papers flew everywhere as my bag slid across the sidewalk. I fell, scraping my palms and knees on the cement.

"Watch yourself, Two." Calypso tossed her long, dark braid over her shoulder, narrowing her fiery gaze on me.

Her catty Ares girl squad, Anastasia and Ren, snickered. They stomped their muddy sandals on the covers of my textbooks as they passed. Seeing those books brutalized stung more than my hands and knees. What had those poor, defenseless books ever done to anyone? Other than belonging to me, AKA, Two. It was a nickname everyone liked to call me. I'd heard others—traitor, defector, turncoat, and the like. But Two was the one that stuck, thanks to its clever double entendre.

Two, for two-faced.

Two, because I was the second Thorne daughter.

It also implied that Riley was One. Since the other Ares students latched onto my sister like their own personal gift from the gods, they wanted me to know which Thorne they preferred. Riley had only been at Arcadia for a month, but she'd already declared herself their reigning queen. Calypso and her bitchy sidekicks were her ladies-in-waiting. The three of them walked ahead without looking back. I turned my hands over, wincing at the angry red scratches.

I was over the constant bullying, the comparisons, and the name-calling. Meanwhile, those same girls kept my sister on a pedestal.

Two broken halves—ha! Riley was not even close to broken. Ares welcomed her with open arms. Her catapult to the top of the social ladder didn't surprise me either. It was no different from back home, in Davidson. She shined no matter where she went. Unlike her, I was fine with not shining. In fact, I preferred it to this. Invisibility was far better than being a social pariah. *Small hiccups*, I told myself. Okay, not small, exactly. More like medium-sized hiccups.

Moments later, someone was there, helping me pick up my books.

"Who did this?" Xander tried to mask his outrage, but I could hear it in every syllable. He was ready to hold that *who* accountable.

"No one. I fell."

The lie slipped too easily from my lips. He gave me a look to let me know he didn't appreciate it. But if he knew, he would rip those girls to shreds. This was something I needed to figure out on my own. Xander couldn't fight my battles for me.

"Who was it, Sheridan?" Xander said again, his jaw ticking.

"It doesn't matter," I sighed. "They *all* hate me."

His face crumbled, and he let out a breath. He hated this situation more than I did. "That won't last, you know."

But I wasn't so sure. The students in Ares designated me their own personal punching bag, and rightly so. In their world, I was a traitor. Bloodlines and magic divided mages, and I refused to choose only one.

Under ordinary circumstances, Xander's approval as house leader would have been enough to gain acceptance. When I joined Aphrodite, I gained that acceptance through Peter Hallas. But things were different this time. No one liked a defector, much less a mage who couldn't choose a side.

This was the bed I made, I reminded myself. After all, *I* begged Headmaster Waddley to allow me to study both love and fire magic. I wanted to study mind magic in Athena too, but I was already pushing my own limits. Socially, anyway. Academics came easily thanks to my bibliomagery skills. My memory was full of impressed books, including every textbook required this semester.

Xander took my elbow, careful not to touch my hurt hands, and pulled me back to my feet. "You should tell everyone about your meeting with the Fates. If they knew why you joined Aphrodite—"

"No." I dusted myself off. Those explanations would fall on deaf ears. Besides, Aphrodite was as much a part of me as Ares. I loved them both.

Xander frowned, but he dropped it for now.

Mythonians believed blending magic diluted bloodlines and weakened their powers. I wasn't so sure that was true. Bibliomagery had shown me knowledge was the source of all great power. I wanted to get my hands on every book, experiment with all types of magic, and learn as much as I could.

Only one problem—the Fates predicted my rage would consume me if I embraced my Ares blood.

They said I would never return home.

They said I would turn to *dark* magic.

They warned me to stay away.

On the other hand, they said love magic would help me find clarity and inner balance. They were right. Love magic soothed me in a way I never imagined. It gave me hope for humanity. It gave me peace.

But it wasn't enough. No one house ever would. No one magic ever would. By joining Ares, I was risking my own fate. I simply didn't care. I refused to conform to any box. At least this way, by studying within both houses, I was forging my own path.

Xander handed me my stack of books, and I slid them into my bag. Traces of his magic seeped through my fingers where his hand brushed against mine, instantly making me feel lighter.

"Thanks."

He caught my chin, forcing me to look at him. "You sure you're okay?" His vibrant blue eyes drowned me with their intensity. As hard as I tried to act unbothered, he always saw through me.

I took a deep breath and nodded. "I will be."

"You'll be safe in your next class," he promised, adjusting the strap of my bag over my shoulder.

Right. Weaponry.

As house leader, it was one of Xander's responsibilities to assist the Master of Arms. Students would get to train with real weapons, both an exciting and slightly terrifying idea. Watching Ares students spar was captivating. They exuded strength and confidence, and I wanted to fight like that too, violent bloodlust be damned.

We walked to the field together, Xander glued to my side. This thing between us was brand new, already off to a rocky start. I had little experience with relationships, but that couldn't be a good predictor of longevity. Then again, my last boyfriend, Connor, gave me the perfect first everything—first conversation, first date, first kiss—and *that* ended in an abrupt, violent twist of events. He fell in love with my sister, the two of them used me, and I tried to kill Riley.



So, yeah.

Smooth sailing often led straight into hurricanes.

I glanced over at Xander and sighed. He was almost too perfect for words. Dark waves of hair. Chiseled face. His eyes—god save me from his eyes—were the deepest blue, framed with thick black lashes. A slightly crooked nose that had been punched one too many times but sort of endearing. And of course, all those lean, gladiator muscles. Best of all, underneath was a beautiful heart.

Xander had bailed me out of more awful situations than I could count. And not because he was bound to a magical promise like I first assumed. Nope, he had done all of those things of his own free will. The oath of protection he'd given was to my sister's mother.

Technically, my half-sister.

My half-sister who was also my cousin.

Ours was bananas-shit crazy family tree, if there ever was one. If I hadn't believed I was part of a mythical Greek lineage, I certainly did now.

Xander's oath only added to the overall suckiness. There was nothing he could do to stop himself from protecting Riley. Even if it meant he had to protect her from *me*.

"We're here," Xander said.

Class was held outside, directly on the field. Everyone lounged in the grass, surrounding a shimmering glass firepit with a base of crystals. Labradorites, by the looks of them.

I swallowed, extracting details from my textbook. No ordinary firepit. That one drew its power from the Fire of Hephaestus.

"Come. Sit." Master Redtree instructed everyone approaching. He stood tall, his metal-banded arms locked behind him. The Ares instructor was late-forties, his dark hair sprinkled with gray, in better shape than anyone I'd ever met. His biceps easily doubled most guys, and that was saying

something because pretty much all Ares descendants looked like badass Roman gladiators.

I didn't know Redtree personally, but he was friendly with my grandfather, and the two of them were very similar. Both carried an aura of power through an austere, stand-to-attention military presence.

Xander and I went our separate ways, him to the front with Redtree, and me to an empty patch of grass. As he walked away, a codependent, needy part of myself wished he could stay with me. My inner feminist quickly stamped that down. I sat by myself, trying not to notice the way the other students made a wide circle around me.

Riley was centered between Calypso and Anastasia, the same girls who pushed me and trampled my books. I went still when I saw her. They all sat with their legs crisscross, giggling and whispering, looking like they'd been friends their whole lives.

She caught my gaze, a gleam in her eye. I frowned, recognizing the animosity in it. I looked away, trying not to let her see how much it bothered me. Being this close to her wasn't good for either of us. It inspired the rage I worked hard to release, ripping my inner balance to shreds. I hated to admit it, but the curse was working, brewing up a storm of emotions. If I felt it this strongly, I couldn't imagine the effect it was having on her. She should have stayed in Davidson like she was supposed to, dammit. Here, she risked both of our lives.

Once all of the students arrived, Redtree spoke in a deep, bellowing voice.

"As you all know, today we have a Blood Moon. Arcadia always holds summonings on these auspicious occasions. The air is thick with energy, ripe for engaging with fire magic." Keeping his hands locked behind his back, he circled around the firepit. "Much like the Mirror Realm, the Fire of Hephaestus determines your worthiness. Personally, I don't think we should allow first years to put their hands in, but school rules dictate each student

receives one chance per year. Here's how it works: You place your hand inside. If you feel nothing, you're not ready. This will be the majority outcome.

"If your palm burns as if you touched fire, your soul weapon is being forged. But again, don't get your hopes up. Most students don't forge their weapons until their senior or mastery years. Even second years rarely achieve it."

I glanced at Xander. He was one of those rare students, having received his soul sword during his second year.

"Let's say by some miracle, the fire determines you're worthy," Redtree continued, his hawk-eyed gaze darting around the crowd. "Make sure you hold your hand steady. You must outlast the pain to complete the summoning. Once it's done, you are bound to your soul weapon for life."

Well, this was just perfect. He was expecting each of us to go up there, in front of *everyone*. I wasn't afraid of the pain, but I didn't want to put my hand in while others were staring. I could already hear their boos and cackles coming for me. Thankfully, Redtree went in alphabetical order, which meant I would be one of the last called.

Student after student got up, put their hand in, and came out with nothing. Most of them lost their tempers, kicked the ground, and shouted expletives. These were hotheaded Ares descendants, after all. None of us handled patience very well.

Leo Valentine started convulsing on his turn. His body jerked chaotically, then he laughed when the crowd gasped in anticipation. He withdrew his arm and shrugged, running off when the other students started throwing random items at him: an apple, two pencils, and someone's tattered sandal.

Before long, Riley was called.

I held my breath, watching her march across the field to the firepit, her bright red locks ablaze in the sunlight. She stood there for several seconds

before jutting her arm into the blue fire. It immediately pushed her hand out.

I swallowed.

She grinned and tried to act as if it were no big deal, but I knew her better than that. An obvious twinge of disappointment filled her eyes.

“Sheridan Thorne,” Master Redtree called, and I flinched. Several groans made their way across the field.

Lovely.

“I hope the fire shoots her back to Aphrodite,” one student said, and I winced.

“I hope it burns her alive,” said another.

Their words lashed against me like a whip. I shouldn’t care what they thought, but I did. To make matters worse, Xander heard them too. “Shut your mouths, or I’ll do it for you,” he said, glaring.

*Let’s get this over with.*

I hurried toward the fire, stopping at the glass cage. The blue flames hissed and swished as if they were alive. Slightly hypnotized, I stuck my arm inside, ready to pull it out and return to my seat as quickly as possible.

But when I jerked back, the fire grabbed hold of me. Its flames wrapped around my wrist, cuffing me there in the spotlight. The burning sensation engulfed my entire arm, like hot grease. I ground my teeth together, feeling my skin sizzle and spark. My instincts told me to yank it out and run, because it felt as if my arm was literally being seared off. But I refused to cower. Not in front of *them*.

I stood as still as possible, digging my heels into the grass, trying not to let the class see how much it hurt. My eyes burned with unshed tears, but I held strong.

“No freaking way,” someone whispered.

“This has to be a joke,” said someone else.

Their whispers and comments buzzed in my ears. I blocked them out, too absorbed by the pain and confusion of what was going on. A tornado of energy swirled around me, dulling everything outside of it. Powerful magic whooshed through my body, sending little sparks of heat in every direction. The magic was searching for something. Whatever it was, I hoped it found it quick.

My arm exploded in an array of white flames. They were so bright it blinded me for a few dizzying seconds. Amazingly, I continued to stand my ground. Eventually the flames dulled, ending with one last burst of blue. My arm fell slack, but my whole body trembled.

Over. Finally.

The entire field was silent. So silent, all I heard was my own shaky breath. I looked at the crowd, a little dazed. All of their wide eyes were on me, but not on my face. Glancing down at my arm, I saw the reason for their stunned gazes.

My fingers were curled around a sleek, golden bow. A quiver of arrows was strapped to my shoulder, encrusted in glittering gems. Diamonds, sapphires, and emeralds—what was I seeing? Both pieces gleamed in the sunlight, as if the gods had personally created them.

Master Redtree slowly clapped his hands together. “Well, well.” He released a shaky breath. “Miss Thorne, you are the youngest student I’ve ever witnessed summon a soul weapon.” He continued to clap, the only one to do so. “Class, this is the student to watch out for. If summoning came that easily, fighting will too.”

Everyone was silent.

I ambled back to my spot on the grass, my new weapon in tow.

“Give it a name.” Redtree nodded to my bow and quiver. “Then it will disappear. Whenever you need your weapon, you can call it to you by name.”

I dimly nodded, still in shock.

Another student was called. Eventually, everyone refocused their attention. I continued staring at the bow in my lap, the cool metal pressed tightly against my palm, in awe. For a weapon made of gold, it felt light in my hands. I slid the strap off my arm and pulled the quiver around to inspect it, running my fingers over the encrusted jewels. Beautiful wasn't a strong enough word. Inspired. Artful. Godlike, seemed more accurate. I wasn't sure I was worthy of such a prized piece of weaponry. I almost didn't want to name it, just so I could hold onto it as long as possible.

Nothing about this made any sense.

Did the Fire of Hephaestus ever make mistakes? Why me, a first year with no experience? I'd never fought or used any weapon, much less a bow and arrow. I didn't know the anything about archery either.

I felt Riley staring before I looked up. When I did, she looked away, but not before I caught the unmistakable fury in her gaze. She didn't have to say a word for me to guess what she was thinking. This wasn't over. I may have made her task more difficult by summoning my soul weapon, but she still had every intention of ending my life.

AT LUNCH, A PAIR OF APHRODITE STUDENTS WAVED TO ME. IT WAS weird because they were the same students who ignored me after I enrolled in Ares classes. I dumbly waved back, just one small rise of my hand as I looked around to see if they were waving to someone else. Hazel, who was normally under Birch's rapt attention, noticed and grinned. "Hey, they like you again."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said, thinking it was probably a mistake. Or worse—a prank. Appearances could be deceiving.

The two of us used to eat lunch with Jett. But when Jett traded me for Hades magic, she split our little friendship trio apart. Now, I spent my lunchtime with Birch and Hazel's overtly cutesy coupledness. To be honest, I didn't mind. I was grateful I still had friends in this school.

Hazel reached for my hand and squeezed it. I caught the pity behind her neon purple frames, and I hated seeing it there. Birch, ever the optimistic faun that he was, offered a cheery wink. "If it makes you feel any better, creatures don't care about descendant houses. We all bleed red."

"I wish everyone felt like that."

Life would be much simpler if magic didn't separate us.

The day grew stranger as it wore on. In my Flight Equestrianism class, a kid from Zeus talked my ear off about his family's collection of winged

horses. I listened quietly, assuming he didn't know who I was.

On my way back to my dorm room that evening, Phoebe Brightly, a junior in House Ares, known for her skill in combat, approached me on the sidewalk. Her strawberry blonde hair and freckles reminded me of my sister, before Riley became the fiery-haired stranger she was today.

"Hey, Sheridan." Her toga swished as she fell into place beside me. She hadn't called me Two, the name I was used to hearing. I blinked several times, stunned by her normal, everyday greeting. "Congrats on your soul weapon!"

My mind turned to mush. I didn't say hello or thank you, the *polite* thing to do. Instead, I went with, "Do you know who I am?"

"Everyone knows who you are."

"Then why are you talking to me?" I looked around. "Aren't you afraid of someone seeing you?"

"Why should I?"

"Because I'm a traitor." Duh.

She waved that off. "No one can fault a geniox for their heritage."

"My heritage?"

She nodded. "Your ability to practice any magic—incredibly special. I have to admit, I'm jealous."

What the—what? I had never heard of such a thing, but then again, I hadn't been in Mythos that long.

"And where did you hear about my unique, *ahem*, bloodline?"

"Ione told everyone." She offered a wide, gap-toothed smile. "You really should have said so right away. The other Ares descendants wouldn't have been so hard on you."

I should've known.

Ione, the reigning Queen of House Aphrodite. *Of course* she started a rumor. She was never one to stand by while anyone she cared about was drug through the mud. And I'd become someone she cared about.



Phoebe and I spoke about Weaponry class for a while, and she asked to see my bow. Still nameless, I handed it to her and she marveled in appreciation. Then she gave it back and we went our separate ways.

After she left, I practically flew up the stairs of House Aphrodite. Ione was inside our dorm room, sitting at her vanity. Hair wrapped in a towel, her delicate face covered in a thick paste the color of seaweed, she raised a brow at my rushed entrance.

“Did you really tell everyone I’m a geniox?” I tossed my bag down on the ground.

She swiveled around, crossing one leg over the other. Her eyes widened at the sight of my bow. “You summoned a *soul weapon*?”

“Nope—me first.” I laid it carefully on my bed. “Why did you start that rumor?”

She shrugged, not even an ounce of shame in her face. “You’re not the only one with secrets bad enough to ruin you. I’ve gotten good at lying.”

Both of our closets were packed full of baggage we wished would disappear and relatives we wished we didn’t have. Her dad was a hollow who cursed her because she and the rest of the family refused to pledge. And my mom traded her life away to the hollows. In a way, our sucktastic histories bonded us. We kept each other’s secrets. Still, this might be taking things too far.

“But Ione,” I let out a breath. “I’m *not* a geniox. People are going to figure that out.”

Her mask cracked.

She waved her hand in the air, turning back around. “For all you know, you could be. Just because you haven’t *tried* practicing other magic doesn’t mean you *can’t*.” She untwisted her towel and brushed out her wet, platinum-blond locks.

“What happens when a Zeus descendant asks me to manipulate electricity? Or a Poseidon descendant wants me to do water-magic? What

the hell am I supposed to do then?”

She shrugged. “Look, it’s not perfect, but it stops other mages from labeling you a traitor. Genioxes are rare, but everyone accepts their ability to practice all magic. Thanks to me, you’re no longer two-faced. You’re talented.”

I ground my teeth together. “Riley will tell everyone I’m not—”

“Maybe. Maybe not. And if she does, who cares? You’ll just be a liar on top of everything else, stuck in the same situation you were in before. But I don’t think she will, because I don’t think she knows the truth.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Just a hunch.”

I tilted my head, knowing her well enough to know there was more to this than a hunch.

She caught my glare and groaned. “I have friends inside of Ares, okay? Riley is aware of your dad’s history, but she doesn’t know a lot about her mother or yours. For all she knows, genioxes exist in your family tree.”

“And these friends are reliable sources?”

She nodded. “I’m trying to get as much info as I can on your sister. Find out what she knows, and more importantly, what she doesn’t. If she ever discovers that Xander is tied to her, she could easily manipulate him.”

The thought made me shudder. “She suspects something.”

Xander stopped me from hitting Riley that day by the fountain, but she didn’t fully understand why. She was, for now, blissfully unaware of the Silver Oath and that Xander was sworn to protect her at any cost. It needed to stay that way.

I sat on the edge of my bed, inhaling a shaky breath. If she learned the truth, she would use him to get to me—just like she did with Connor.

*Connor.*

I winced, remembering how far she went to hurt me. Not for one second did I believe Riley ever loved him. If she did, she wouldn’t be here, in

Mythos. It was obvious she used Connor, and he played right into it like the fool he was.

Ione eyed me through her vanity mirror. “Don’t worry, Sheridan. Everything will be fine.”

As much as I wished that were true, it didn’t *feel* like everything would be fine. It felt as if I were on a steadily sinking ship. At some point, I would have to jump out.

“She’ll never learn the truth.” Ione sensed where my thoughts had traveled without me having to say anything.

I nodded, hoping she was right.

Ione’s methods were unusual, but she always had my back. For someone who hated me so vehemently only a few months ago, it was still surprising. Somewhere along the way, my biggest enemy had become my closest friend.

“Thanks, Ione.”

“Don’t mention it.” She swiveled back around, an idea lighting her blue eyes. “Aphrodite is holding a dinner party tonight. You must come.”

“I don’t know...” I chewed the inside of my cheek. With everything going on, a party probably wasn’t a good idea.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Socializing will be good for you, fire-blood. You’re going, and don’t you dare argue. I did, after all, save your reputation.”

AN HOUR LATER, WE WERE DRESSED IN OUR FINEST SILK TOGAS, OUR heads covered in gold laurel leaves. Every mage was a vision of loveliness, in matching shades of lavender, pink, and white. The dinner hall was romantic too, decorated with hundreds of roses and candles, the ceiling spelled to look like the night sky. These particular descendants wouldn't have it any other way. After all, they were the rulers of love and beauty.

But they weren't the only descendants present. Once per semester, it was tradition for each of the houses to host another, to help foster relationships. Tonight, we were hosting House Poseidon.

I fidgeted nervously, reaching for the charm bracelet that was no longer there. My wrist still felt naked without it. It was such a small thing, but I loved that bracelet and resented Riley for poisoning it with lethara.

Peter Hallas saw us enter the room and came over to say hello. "Ione," he said, nodding elegantly. "Breathtaking, as always."

I stopped myself from rolling my eyes. Aphrodite descendants were sophisticated flirts. They always complimented one another's beauty, just as Ares descendants admired one another's strength. It was just their way.

Ione smiled. "Thank you, Peter."

"And Sheridan," he added, looking me over, "lavender suits you far better than red."

My cheeks warmed at the subtle dig, and I wondered if he was still butthurt over my dual-enrollment.

“It’s been years since Arcadia had a geniox.” A warm smile spread across his face. “And an honor to have one in our own house. You should have told people sooner.”

Hearing that from him put me at ease. After several weeks of everyone treating me like a traitor, I’d been doubtful. Scorned and hated yesterday, honored and envied today. Such a thin line between what was acceptable and what wasn’t.

“To be honest, I only recently found out.”

More like, I recently found out Ione was a highly skilled gossip. I glanced at her and she winked.

“Well, we’re thrilled.” He held out each of his arms for us to take. “Come on, ladies. Let’s get some food. I’m starving.”

From there, the night passed with little drama. Everyone was polite, and no one made me feel like an outsider. Not on purpose anyway. Part of me still questioned my own belonging.

The Poseidon descendants reminded me of literal fish out-of-water, appearing uncomfortable and otherworldly. Dressed in coral and turquoise, they had pointy teeth and big, vacant eyes. Their pallid skin was covered in metallic tattoos, and their laurel leaves were encrusted with pearls and seashells. The point of the event was to socialize with them, but I gave up after the first three or so awkward conversations. I didn’t know how to act around people anymore, and they didn’t warm up to me either.

As the night wore on, I found myself alone beside the drink table, looking up at the clock on the wall every few seconds, wondering if it was too early to leave.

“How’s it going in the Mirror Realm?” Peter said, approaching me once again. “Make any progress yet?”

His company was much better than the odd fish people. “To be honest, not so good.”

“What’s the problem?”

“My subjects genuinely like each other, but they’re letting little things come between them.”

An understatement. Mia and Ben had it *bad* for each other, but they were both too stubborn to make the first move.

“Isn’t that the way life goes?” Peter chuckled. “It’s our job to ensure love outweighs circumstances. You must get them to see that.”

As he spoke, his gaze drifted across the room, resting on Ione. She smiled at something one of her friends said, totally unaware of his attention. His hopeless expression made me do a double-take.

“You’re right, I’ll work on that. Any tricks or tips?”

But he wasn’t listening. He was still staring at Ione, as if he’d forgotten the rest of the room, the way Xander sometimes looked at me.

“Um, Peter...are you...” I wasn’t sure if I read this situation correctly, and I didn’t want to overstep.

But he guessed where my thoughts went. “In love?” He nodded. “It’s no secret.”

“With *Ione*?”

“Yes.” He tapped the rim of his soda with his fingers. “I’m pretty sure she feels the same.”

That explained a *lot*.

Lately, she was always nervous before events like this. Before we came here, she redid her hair and makeup dozens of times. And when Peter greeted her, her face brightened as if he was the sun to her moon.

Peter returned his gaze to mine with a miserable sigh. “Circumstances.” He answered my next question before I could ask it, then straightened, his expression unreadable. Anyone standing nearby would never detect the torment I just witnessed.

*Circumstances.*

That one word spoke volumes.

“I had no idea.”

He cleared his throat, forcing a dimpled grin. “You could brew a potion to rev up some hormones. For your subjects.”

I nodded. “Sure, I’ll try that.”

“But like I said, love must outweigh everything else...”

With a wink, he drifted from my side. As if the moment never happened, he was already back to working the room, charming a group of third years and wearing his standard mega-watt smile.

He and Ione were more alike than I realized; both had a knack for keeping their emotions hidden. I made a mental note to pry the details out of her later. We were supposed to be friends, dammit. She was supposed to tell me about stuff like this. Then again, there could be a reason she never brought it up. Actually—I remember her saying something very similar.

*Love is only good under the right circumstances. Sometimes, as much as you think you’re perfect for someone, it doesn’t work. Like a puzzle piece in the wrong box—it doesn’t fit, no matter how hard you try.*

My eyes flaring, I swallowed a deep breath. She *had* brought it up; I just didn’t know she was referring to Peter. He was the puzzle piece that didn’t fit. I wondered what circumstances were so great that they kept them apart.

“You look like a crayon that wandered outside the lines.”

I blinked, so caught up in my own thoughts that I hadn’t noticed the Poseidon descendant approach.

She was one of the strongest of their house, a wisp of a girl everyone called Storm. The nickname came from her unique set of abilities—she could create actual storms. Thunder and lightning, and all. Unlike her delicate features though, her voice was throaty and unexpectedly forceful.

“A what?” I said, confused.

“Tell me something, Sheridan.” She tilted her head to the side. “Is it true you’re the youngest mage to summon a soul weapon in Arcadian history?”

Her eyes were odd. A silvery color that twisted and clouded black irises. “It’s uncommon,” I swallowed, “but I don’t know if I’m the youngest.”

“Certainly the youngest *I’ve* heard of.” She circled around me in a kind of predatory manner. “Tell me something else. Why do you let them get to you?”

Them? “What do you mean?”

“You’re a genio, arguably one of the more powerful mages of our time, and yet I find you here. Hiding in the corner, as if you don’t realize you’re a force to be reckoned with.”

My cheeks flushed, and I wasn’t sure how to respond, but I refused to be intimidated. “I’m used to staying out of everyone’s way—” I nodded toward the drink table. “And I was hoping there would be something stronger than punch.”

Her mouth curved up on one side. “I like you...even if you are naïve.”

The backhanded compliment made me straighten. “Well, I’m new to this world. I’m still learning the ropes.”

“Poor excuses.” She shrugged, unapologetic. “You understand enough. People should stay out of *your* way, not the other way around.”

I opened my mouth, but I was too stunned to speak.

“Here’s my unsolicited advice,” she said, before I had the chance to say anything. “Don’t bother trying to fit in. In places of magic, you’re better off embracing what makes you unique.”

I got the feeling we were discussing a lot more than what was on the surface. Storm reached for two glasses of punch from the table, handing one to me. With a swirl of her hand over the rims, she whispered, “*Vocatus*.” She held her glass up in salute. “I’ve officially chosen my side.”

I only gave her half my attention, too busy trying to figure out what she did to my drink. “Side?”



She took a giant swig, and I figured it was safe to do the same—ah ha. I licked my lips, feeling the burn of alcohol. What a nifty little trick.

“Your sister approached me about forming an alliance.”

I snapped to attention, my stomach hollowing. “She did *what*?”

Storm was a Poseidon descendant. She manipulated wind and rain. I could only guess what Riley wanted from her.

“There’s the naivety I mentioned.” She tsked, shaking her head. “While you’re hiding in corners, your sister is busy networking, building an army of powerful friendships.”

I tightened my fingers around my glass, trying not to lose my shit there in front of everyone. Riley’s obsession with my destruction was getting out of hand. Then again, the curse was simply working in perfect order. Fantastic of my sister to play right into it.

“What did she offer you?”

“To lend me her magic, at any time, as long as I swore to do the same. I’m no fool though. I’m aware she’s after your blood. An alliance with her means helping her take you down.”

I swallowed. “What did you say?”

“Nothing. I wanted to meet you first. Now I have, and I’ve decided to align myself on your side instead.” With a wave of her hand, a golden coin formed, lying flat against her palm. She handed it to me. “My seal of support.”

I turned the coin back and forth, marveling at its weight and power. I’d read about these seals; they bound two individuals together, sort of like a contract. With hers, I could summon Storm at any time, but she could do the same with me.

“Why?” It didn’t make sense that she would choose me. Riley was the one everyone liked.

“Because you’re the more powerful sister.”

I shook my head.

Nothing good could come from this. I decided long ago, should the curse manifest, I wouldn't be on the killing side of it. If Riley wanted to bind herself through magical contracts, that was on her. Being bound to the curse was already more than I could handle.

"Look," I sighed. "I appreciate the vote of confidence, but I'm not building an army."

"Says the dead girl walking."

I shrugged. "Perhaps."

Death was a fate I had to accept.

Storm nodded, then finished her drink and set it on the table beside us. "You might change your mind. Just know, if you need me, I'm available."

With that said, she disappeared into the crowd.

I thought about what she said as she left, the sea of faces around me becoming a blur. A lump grew in my throat, making it difficult to swallow.

It was getting to me, the seriousness of what was happening. No matter how much I tried to ignore it, Riley wasn't letting this go. My own sister. The girl who used to braid my hair and taught me how to ride a bike. The girl who hugged me when I was afraid. We made blanket forts together, pretending they were castles in a fairytale land. Now we were in a deathmatch.

When Riley came to Arcadia, she told me this wouldn't end well. She told me the only way it ended was with her knife in my heart.

But it kind of felt like it was already there.

I SNUCK AWAY FROM DINNER EARLY, RETREATING ACROSS CAMPUS TO MY dorm. The orange-tinged Blood Moon was full and bright. I steered my gaze up to the night sky, traveling over the constellations, thinking of my dad and the times we spent stargazing through my little telescope back in Davidson.

*“Always look for Polaris first, then go from there.”* He told me that every time, as if he were the world expert on star maps.

*“Why?” I said.*

It seemed like a silly rule. The North Star wasn’t even the brightest; I never understood why it deserved so much attention.

*“The other stars are unreliable, you can’t trust them,” he said with a wink. “They’re full of lies and deceit. Never believe they are who they say they are.”*

*I rolled my eyes, chuckling. “And Polaris always tells the truth?”*

*“Of course!” he said, as if the star were his best friend. “Polaris will always be unwavering, lighting the way, shining in the darkest of skies. For centuries, that little star has helped guide us. So, when your universe feels like its spinning out of control, just look to Polaris. She will always shine true.”*

And just like that, the most popular star in the sky became my favorite. Even now, I couldn't help but look at her and think of my dad.

House Aphrodite was empty when I returned. The halls were lit only by the moonlight streaming in from the windows, the marble floors carrying echoes of my footsteps. A fresh stack of books waited upstairs on my nightstand, if I could summon the energy to impress them.

A deflated sigh escaped. Impressing the books would help me take my mind off things, but all I really wanted was to curl under the covers of my bed and cry for hours, feeling sorry for myself. I'd been holding it down for days, keeping my head held high, even when I was an outcast. But this... this was a new low. I mean, I knew my sister was wicked. Riley had done enough to hurt me in the past; she'd stolen my boyfriend, poisoned me with lethara, and took delight in my downfall.

Now she was initiating war.

We weren't playing one of her twisted games. This time, she was serious. She meant to kill me, and part of me had still been hoping she would wake up and remember I was her sister. That hope was squashed when Storm told me Riley was seeking seals of support. Talk about getting the rug swept from under my feet.

Even now, I cautiously peeked around corners and down hallways, wondering if a monster was waiting on the other side. Cheers to Riley for turning me into a walking, paranoid mess.

Scents of polished leather, evergreen, and freshly fallen rain struck me as I rounded the last corner. Recognizing the warm, inviting magic instantly lifted my mood. A slow smile spread across my face; those were fast becoming my favorite scents.

Xander stood by my door, leaning against the frame. For several long moments, my mind went blank as I took in the sight of him. Tanned skin, heavy-lidded eyes, and soft lips next to that strong, square jawline. Adding to his overall perfection was a mischievous charm; he was up to something.

“Hello, gorgeous,” he said, the timbre of his voice deeper than usual. “Want to go to a real party?”

He made the offer sound like a forbidden temptation. I was pretty sure I’d let him take me anywhere, even into the pits of hell.

“What kind of party?”

He straightened. “An Ares one.”

Scratch that—I’d let him lead me anywhere *except* there. “Hard pass.”

I had enough of Ares torture in class. I didn’t need another round in my spare time.

“Not so fast.” Xander placed my arm into the crook of his, causing my belly to do a little flip-flop. “Tone’s rumor worked. The whole school thinks you’re a genio. Besides, you’re the only first year to score a soul weapon. Do you know how amazing that is?”

My cheeks warmed at his compliment, but I was still hesitant. “Her rumor spread that fast?”

He nodded. “You’ll be welcome. Fair warning though, it’s nothing like your delicate Aphrodite parties, with your crystal chandeliers and flowers. Nothing breakable, no prim and proper nonsense, and everyone gets pretty loud.”

Hmm...

Sounded tempting, but the last party hadn’t gone that great. I wasn’t sure I was up for another this soon. “I don’t know,” I hedged. “I found out some things about Riley.”

He groaned. “Can we forget about Sister Satan for one night?”

“She’s building an army,” I said, point-blank.

His eyes flared. “How—”

“She’s going around, asking for seals of support. Storm told me. She gave me hers.” I showed him the golden coin, twisting it between my fingers.

“Whoa...” He ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t expect her to go this far.”

I let out a breath. “Neither did I.”

He quickly blinked the glimmer of fear out of his eyes. “Okay, so she’s worse than we thought. We’ll deal with this when your grandfather gets back.”

Who knew how long *that* would take.

Grandpa left for Davidson almost as soon as Riley arrived. He hadn’t been able to withdraw Riley from Arcadia, but Dad could since he was our parent and legal guardian. Dad could haul Riley back to Davidson, Timbuktu, or even to Mars if he wanted, as he held all the parental rights. But no one could get a hold of the man, and that presented a problem. So, Grandpa left in search of him. Meanwhile, he advised me to stay away from my sister, and to “not get killed”. That part was proving more and more difficult.

Xander placed his hands on the sides of my arms. “Everything will be fine. We’ll figure this out, I swear. But for tonight...” He let out a hopeful breath. “Let’s just have fun. Remember the bubbles? We need another night like that.”

The bubbles had been our way of escaping the grim reality of all this curse stuff, an escape I badly needed at the time. An escape I badly needed *now*. I chewed the inside of my cheek, knowing he was right but still unsure.

“Come on, Sher,” he said sweetly. “I want you to meet my friends.”

“I want to meet your friends, too,” I admitted. Especially if they no longer considered me a traitor.

“Then let me show you a good time, damsel. You’ll never want to go to a lame Aphrodite party again.”

The Aphrodite insult didn’t offend me, but the nickname he coined made me flinch. The whole damsel-in-distress thing hit too close to the

truth. Weak and helpless were not admired traits in House Ares. “Fine, I’ll go. On one condition.”

Xander sighed and dropped his hands; he knew what was coming. “Here we go.”

“We start those training sessions you’ve been putting off.”

He frowned, his blue eyes narrowing. “I don’t like your reasons for wanting them.”

Good grief. He wouldn’t even *consider* Persephone’s Cure. Six months in the Underworld with Riley was better than the two of us murdering one another in Mythos—if I could get her to agree to it.

“Look, Riley isn’t even on board yet. It’s not like I’m going to the Underworld tomorrow.”

“You would if you could convince her.”

True, but admitting that would only make him more obstinate.

I pointed out the obvious instead. “Does it look like that’s happening soon?”

His lips thinned; he couldn’t argue there.

I understood why he pushed so hard against me on this. The Underworld had scarred him, and this was his way of keeping me safe. I gently touched his shoulder, trying to draw him out of his own head. “Would training me really be so terrible?”

“Yes,” he snapped. “If I build your confidence, you’ll believe you’re ready to face anything, and you’re not. Nothing can ever prepare you for what’s down there.”

“You’re forgetting, I survived it once.”

“For one measly day, Sheridan. Not six months.”

“My mother,” I swallowed, despising that word, “lives there. She would help me.”

Probably.

Petra Drakos, or as I liked to call her, The World's Worst Mother, was a bit of an enigma. For all of her wickedness, she seemed to genuinely care about me.

"Oh, sure," Xander scoffed. "Let's entrust the woman who vowed to kill your sister to keep you safe in the Underworld. Great plan."

Okay, he had me there. "So, I need to fine-tune the details. But you have to admit, it's still the best plan I've got."

He looked away. "The right plan just hasn't occurred to us yet."

Ugh. He was beyond impossible!

Since making him see reason wasn't working, I tried a new tactic.

"Who cares about what's down there anyway—what about what I'm dealing with right here? If Riley sends another monster my way, I'm screwed."

Xander sniffed, seeing through me. "Really, a guilt-trip?"

"I'll be ripped to shreds." I gave him my best damsel face, batting my lashes. Hey, he was the one who came up with the nickname. If he wanted the shoe to fit... "Remember the nightcrawler? I was *seconds* away from death."

"This is beneath you, Sheridan."

"Or what if it's Riley herself? You can't defend me because you swore to protect *her*."

He let out a long, tortured groan. "I hate you." He rubbed his temples, looking stressed. "Fine. I'll train you."

I stood on my tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. "Thank you, Xander."

He steered me back down the stairs, grumbling as we walked. "I'm clearly on the losing side of this bargain."

"Let's try to make tonight worth it then."



XANDER WASN'T EXAGGERATING. THE ARES PARTY WAS APHRODITE'S polar opposite. As we approached the house, two gladiators were fencing outside in a makeshift ring, using magic to help them levitate. Their swords clanked loudly, fire sparking with every blow. We stopped to watch the match while others around us placed bets. One sword glowed a neon green, the other a fiery red. I leaned against a wooden post, holding my breath as the fighter with the green sword barely missed a clip to the shoulder.

"Do they ever get hurt?" I said, unable to tear my gaze away.

"Yes, sometimes." Xander leaned against the post beside me. "But during matches like these, they spell the swords to prevent killing blows."

Ah, no wonder Ares descendants trained and sparred with such fervor, as if nothing could stop them. Fear didn't hold them back.

"Who do you think will win?"

The question caught me by surprise; my fencing knowledge was limited. Seizing up the two combatants, I tried to guess. "The one with the red sword looks like he could squash the other guy."

"It's not always about strength or size. The green one is swift."

The green fighter knocked his opponent's sword from his hands. It fell and slid feet across the ground. He held his blade to his red fighter's throat, demanding he yield.

“You’re good,” I said, admiring his ability to call the win. “You should’ve placed a bet.”

“Around here, you learn to watch how others fight. Knowing their strengths and weaknesses will help you more than anything else.”

“Thanks for the tip, gladiator.”

He grinned. “Let’s go in.”

House Ares was all hardwood and metal, no frills or pretty things like Aphrodite. Ancient weapons decorated the stone walls. Loud, upbeat music vibrated throughout the house, as well as raucous shouts and laughter. Xander took my hand, leading me toward a set of sofas by the fireplace where a group of gladiators in leather kilts sat, drinking ale from wooden mugs.

One of them stood and shouted, spilling his ale in his excitement. He was stocky with dark, shaggy hair and an infectious grin. As we approached, the guy clapped Xander on the back. “Bout time you made it. Where have you been—” he peeked around his shoulder, “—and *who* have you brought?”

“Cassius, meet Sheridan Thorne.”

His brown eyes flicked to Xander for a second, a question in them, then quickly returned to me. I stilled under the weight of his gaze. “The geniox.” He held out his hand, his grip strong as he shook mine. A long, white scar spiraled from his fingers, all the way up his arm. “I had a feeling I’d be seeing you again.”

“Again?” I said, confused.

“We sort of already met, on the ferry.”

“Oh, right.” The day I traveled into the Mythonian islands. He was with Xander out on the boat’s deck; but at the time, I hadn’t been paying much attention to him.

“Nice work on the soul weapon, by the way.” He gave me a brief salute. “You’re the only freshman I’ve known to summon one.”

“Thank you.” My insides warmed. The rejection I expected wasn’t in Cassius’s expression. It made me feel like things were finally turning around, like I was no longer an outcast.

“Did you name it?”

“Not yet.” I had to leave it back in my dorm for that very reason.

Xander said, “Don’t be like Cassius. He named his weapon after himself.”

Cassius squared his shoulders proudly. “It’s the greatest name on the planet—why *wouldn’t* I name it after myself? At least I didn’t give mine some stupid, frou-frou moniker like Reina gave her axe.”

A tall goddess of a girl with black hair and blunt bangs spun around, hands on her leather-clad hips. With curves and muscles for days, a sharp chin, and bright green eyes, she looked like a warrior princess. “Talking shit about me again, Cass?”

Cassius smirked, clearly glad he gained her attention. “Sheridan, meet my lover, Reina.” He placed an arm around her waist.

Reina shoved him off of her. “He wishes.”

I hid my smile.

Cassius ignored that, continuing on with introductions. “Sheridan is Arcadia’s resident geniox.”

“Interesting.” Her piercing gaze cut into me, her manner very direct and forthcoming.

“And, apparently, a friend of Xander’s,” Cassius continued. “Any friend of Xander’s is a friend of mi—”

“Girlfriend,” Xander corrected.

The word made me blink.

The word made *everyone* blink.

Neither of us had used those titles out loud before. I stiffened and looked up. His blue eyes locked with mine for a moment, as if making sure

I was good with it. I subtly nodded, a firestorm of flutters unfurling within me.

Reina and Cassius looked even more stunned. “Close your mouth, Cass.” She pushed his chin up. “There’s a first time for everything.”

Xander sighed. “Don’t make a big deal of it, guys.”

Things were getting awkward fast. Clearing my throat, I tried to change the subject, spitting out the first question I could think of to ask Reina. “I’m curious; what did you name your axe?”

“Empress Alladora.” She glared at Cassius. “And it’s a damned fitting name for such a prized piece of weaponry.” In her hands appeared a gleaming, platinum axe with golden vines twisting around its hilt. Impressive.

Cassius snorted. “For a porcelain doll, maybe. Not an axe.”

She raised it to his throat. “Don’t mock. With one swing, the empress could take that empty, useless head of yours off clean.”

Cassius glanced down at the blade and quickly pushed her hand away. “You’d miss me too much.”

She rolled her eyes. “As much as I’d miss a migraine.”

Their lighthearted banter made me smile. It was easy to see why Xander liked them.

Reina shoved Cassius’s shoulder. “Don’t be rude—get Sheridan something to drink.” She turned to me again, her nose twitching. “We don’t have any of that bubbly piss they drink in Aphrodite.”

“Ale is fine.” At least I hoped it was. My experience with drinking was pretty limited, too.

As soon as Cassius left to do her bidding, Reina shoved her mug into Xander’s hands. “Someone needs to get me a refill as well.”

Xander glanced at me, and I could tell he didn’t want to leave my side. “But—”

“She can survive without you for a few minutes.”

I nodded, letting him know it was okay.

“Fine,” he grumbled, walking off in the same direction Cassius. “But be *nice*.”

“I’m always nice,” Reina insisted.

I was suddenly nervous. Whereas Cassius was warm and friendly, Reina was sort of intimidating. And without Xander by my side, I felt like an open target.

She looked over me with her pointed gaze, gesturing for me to take a seat on one of the leather sofas. I did, and she followed suit. “You’re from the human world, right?”

“Yes.”

“How did you meet Xander?”

Her curiosity made sense. Xander was several years ahead of me, and I was brand new to the school. We didn’t exactly run in the same circles.

“Ah, we met on the ferry. Then, later, he helped me out of a booby trap.” It was a simplified, cut-and-dried version of everything that brought us together.

Reina arched a brow. “Now *that* surprises me.”

“Which part?”

“That he helped you.”

“Why?” I didn’t understand. All Xander had done was free me from the net.

“There’s a pact between seniors to force freshman to figure out those traps on their own. If another freshman helped you, that’s fine. But Xander would have caught hell for it. Our classmates would have set another trap for him, just to teach him a lesson.”

I swallowed, finding the tradition strange and barbaric. “Sorry, but I’m grateful he violated your pact.”

Several students had passed me that day, hardly bothering to glance up. Since I was new to magic, I never would have gotten out that tree if Xander

hadn't come along when he did.

Reina tilted her head to the side, as if she were trying to figure me out. "He must really like you."

At the time, Xander thought he was sworn to protect me. That he happened to like me was a nice bonus, but it had nothing to do with his motivation for helping me.

"Tell me something, what do humans do for fun?"

Thank God—a change of subject. It was easier to answer this question. "Pretty much the same thing mages do. They go to parties, dance, play games and stuff."

"Do they spar?"

I laughed once. "Not usually."

"How boring. Good for you for escaping."

If only she knew how literal of an escape it was. Had I stayed in Davidson, my sister and I would have torn each other apart until there was nothing left. Of course, now that Riley had enrolled at Arcadia, we were back at square one.

"Some parts weren't so bad..." I sighed, thinking about the simplicity of my human life before everything blew up. "There are things I miss."

"Like what?"

"Let's see," I tapped my fingers against the cushion. "Morning Starbucks runs. The variety of seasons, especially the way the leaves change in the fall. Oh, I definitely miss my cell phone—and good Wi-Fi."

And my Dad, my friends, and sometimes even Connor, but all of those subjects were too sad to bring up to someone I'd just met.

"I've heard humans use their gadgets to avoid social interaction. Doesn't sound appealing."

That was a fair point. I tried to think of something else that didn't involve technology.

"I miss poker night."

Dad's poker nights gave me some of my best memories. We'd laugh, steal each other's money, and bet on things like chore duties or embarrassing dares. One time, I made Riley go to the grocery store in a purple leotard and a glitter top hat. She loved the attention though, and she wasn't nearly as embarrassed as I would have been.

"Po-ker?" Reina emphasized each syllable. "Does it involve pointy objects?"

I laughed. "No, nothing like that. It's a card game."

"What's the object?"

"To steal each other's money."

Cassius reappeared with a second mug in his hand, passing it to me. "Stealing money? I like the sound of this game already."

"It's probably not fun for anyone that can read minds, so I wouldn't play with Hades or Athena descendants, but you guys might enjoy it."

Reina stood up. "I have a deck of cards. You *must* teach us."

"Right now?"

I looked between their faces, and they both nodded eagerly.

Xander came back with Reina's ale, catching the tail end of our conversation. He shrugged. "Why not?"

"Okay." I grinned, excited. "We'll need a table and some coins."

All of this was still hard to believe. They weren't kicking me out, avoiding me, or tying me to an execution block. Instead, we were going to play poker—*poker!*

While setting up, a few other students saw us, and asked if they could join in. Some of them had already learned the game from their stints in the human world. For everyone else, I went over the rules, listing the winning hands in order of rank.

Two hours later, the music died down, and nearly the entire room surrounded our card table, entertained by the drama of it all. One player, Darius, became the chip leader for a while. He spent a summer in Las

Vegas, and he was skilled at catching bluffs. Another player, Sasha, came from a rich family and got a thrill at gambling her money away. Cassius kept trying to cheat by peeking over Reina's shoulder. She slapped him across the back of his head, and he laughed so hard, ale spit out through his nose. That was another thing I was learning about Ares descendants; violence wasn't always seen as a bad thing, like it was in the human world. Some physical violence, little smacks and kicks and bites, were more akin to showing affection.

As the night wore on, and after all the beginners were knocked out, I played more aggressively. For several hands, it was only Darius and me. Then, with a lucky pair of Aces, I took the pot. The room went wild, cheering me on, like they would at the end of a sparring match. Xander howled along with them, his eyes full of pride. But I knew it wasn't just because of the game. He was happy to see me finding my stride and making friends inside his own house.

Darius sighed, shaking his head. "Well done, little hustler."

"I did mention I've been playing a while," I said with a smirk.

He laughed. "I enjoyed every second of this defeat."

I reached for my stack of lixers and wots, looking around. "Any more takers?"

"I'll sit in."

I froze at the sound of *that* voice.

Slowly lifting my gaze, I watched as the room parted in front of me. Riley stood at the doorway, twirling a coin purse attached to a rope on her red toga. "That is, if you feel like losing."

Icy knots coiled in my stomach. It had been such a good night—an amazing night—and now she was here to *ruin* it.

Xander, who had been standing several feet away with Cassius, was suddenly at my side, his hand gripping the back of my chair. I glanced up,



catching the distrust in his gaze, almost as thick as my own. “Let’s get out of here,” he whispered. “Grab your winnings and we’ll sneak out.”

That was probably the smart thing to do, but something, a greater force maybe, kept me planted in my seat.

Riley was the only person here that stood a real chance at beating me, but I knew she was after a much larger victory than a pot of wots and lixers. Part of me wanted to do as Xander suggested and run, but another, more hopeful part factored in the opportunity. A few rounds of poker would force my sister and I to interact. It could remind her of all the good memories we shared, before we became enemies. The night might not be ruined after all...

I also knew Riley’s tells, an advantage I could use. And we could finally talk. The surrounding crowd didn’t exactly allow for privacy, but it was better than nothing.

“Let’s do it.” I looked straight at her, refusing to cower.

Everyone stopped what they were doing, gawking in silence. The tension in the room grew by the second, like a ticking bomb about to explode.

Trailed by Calypso and Anastasia, Riley approached the table and sat in the chair across from me. She dropped the purse’s contents on the table, making me wonder where she’d gotten all of that money. Certainly not from Dad, who had forbidden her to enroll at Arcadia. Not Grandpa either, who was away searching for Dad.

“Deal.” She gestured to my stack of cards.

I slid the cards into a row and then back again, never taking my eyes off her. There was a noticeable gleam in her gaze. She was up to something. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I would find out soon enough.

For a while, we took turns winning hands, playing it safe. Sometimes she would fold, sometimes I would. Neither of us made any risky moves. I lost a few wots to her pair of queens, then she lost it back to my pair of

nines. I caught on to her when she was bluffing. She'd fan back her hair or carefully arch a brow. But overall, it was a pretty boring game. I tried to talk to her between hands, just little things like, "Remember that time you hid cards under your shirt, then you forgot and got up to pee, and they all fell out on the way to the bathroom?"

Riley only nodded and said, "Yep."

"Or the time we invited the Littles over," I said with a meaningful laugh. The Littles were our younger, homeschooled neighbors. Dad made us invite them, even though Riley and I thought the sister and brother duo were super weird. "Remember how Bethany kept farting and blaming her brother, and he kept referring to himself in the third person, by his full name. Every hand started with, Jeremy Little *calls*."

It was a story we used to cackle over for hours, but Riley didn't even crack a smile.

I let out a small breath.

This wasn't *working*.

My stomach sank as a frightening thought crept into my head. Maybe the sister I remembered no longer existed. As far as I could tell, this one was a stranger.

Riley took our game to the next level. "Why don't we make things more interesting?" she suggested, staring at the flop I dealt. "A little bet."

"What kind of bet?"

My cards were good. *Really* good. Whatever she had in mind, she was going down.

"The loser jumps from the Ledge of Doom. Tonight, right after this game."

I frowned. Here she was, just looking for another way to kill me. It was so predictable, I rolled my eyes.

"I'm not interested."

"House Ares is no place for cowards."

“Neither is it a place for killers.” I stared pointedly at her, and she shifted in her seat. It was the first sign of discomfort she’d shown since arriving. A win, in my book.

“I’m not a killer,” she said, adding a cheerful, “yet.”

I tightened my grip around my cards. “This house stands for heroism, bravery, and strength—”

“Exactly.” Her voice sharpened. “And if you had any of those traits, you’d take the bet.”

Everyone surrounding us stared expectantly. Oh, she was good, putting me on the spot like this. If I didn’t take her stupid bet, none of them would ever truly believe I belonged, and I was already on shaky ground as it was.

I hid my hand and spun around in my seat, whispering to Xander, “What’s this Cliff of Doom she’s talking about?”

“Ledge of Doom,” Xander corrected. “It’s only about ten to fifteen feet high, but it doesn’t get its name from its height.”

Ten feet? That wasn’t so bad. “What’s at the bottom?”

“The Inlet of Sorrows. Trust me, you don’t want to jump in there.”

Good grief, what was up with these terrifying names?

Reina pushed Xander aside and leaned down to my chair height, keeping her voice low. “The inlet is home to a den of vicious, extremely jealous mermaids. If they notice you, they’ll steal your beauty.”

I gulped. “*Steal* my beauty?”

She nodded. “They’re afraid of fire though. If you’ve got enough practice, you can handle them, no problem.”

Her words boosted my confidence. Fire-magic was one of my better skills. If she was right about the mermaids, I had nothing to worry about. I was also sitting pretty with a really amazing hand, a straight draw. Riley’s odds of beating me with these cards were minimal at best.

“You’ve got this, Sheridan.” Reina patted my arm. “Take that wretched sister of yours down.”

I looked up at Xander. His face was like stone, but I caught the worry in his gaze. He nodded, letting me know all I needed. It was up to me.

This wasn't just about defeating my sister. I had to accept her challenge or else I'd look weak.

"Fine." I spun back around in my chair. "I agree to your terms, but if I win, you don't jump from the ledge."

She pursed her lips. "What do you want?"

A loaded question—what did I want?

For her to stop trying to kill me, for one, but I knew better than to ask for that. She would never agree.

"Dinner tomorrow night." I offered a weak smile. "Just the two of us. An hour or two of your time while you hear me out about our..." Prying eyes were all around us, so I chose my words carefully. "Our situation."

I wanted to propose my plan to go after Persephone's Cure. Xander would realize it too, and he wouldn't be happy. Maybe it was my imagination, but I swear I felt his furious gaze bore into my back.

"Agreed." Riley nodded.

She accepted my terms a little too quickly, but I wasn't worried. My hand was golden.

I dealt out the last card. A king came on the river, making my straight that much stronger.

"Moment of truth," Riley said, arching her brow. "Whatcha got, Sher Bear?"

Hearing her use my family's pet nickname in front of everyone, especially with a derisive tone, boiled my blood. I was going to enjoy beating her with all of House Ares watching.

I laid down my cards, watching her gaze absorb the weight of my hand. "Straight high."

She clicked her tongue. "Oh, that's a good hand."

I smiled, pleased with myself. "Thanks."

“Just not good enough.”

My stomach hollowed. *No*.

She flattened her cards against the table. “A full house for you, sister. We know a thing or two about those, don’t we?”

I swallowed. She’d won. Riley had actually beaten me, and she didn’t even have to use magic.

A giant hiccup rose in my chest.

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO DO THIS,” XANDER SAID, SWALLOWING. “WE can just leave. Right now, me and you.”

We stood on the ledge, staring out at the inlet, along with Reina and Cassius. They surrounded me, looking anxious with their crinkled brows and their matching worried gazes.

“If I don’t jump, I’ll look weak.”

“So look weak,” he practically growled. “Better than you getting *hurt*.”

“Xander, I agreed to the terms. I have to do this.”

His jaw ticked, but he didn’t argue. As much as he might wish it were otherwise, we both knew it was too late to back out now.

The ledge lay flat over the water, about fifteen feet down, just as Xander said. I gazed down at the glassy surface, wishing I had more confidence in my magic. Bibliomagery came naturally, but the rest I was still learning as I went. Creating fire wasn’t all that difficult. That, I could do easily. Directing it, though, could be tricky.

It didn’t help that Riley and her trio of gremlins had banded together across the inlet, their lawn chairs parked in the dewy grass, and they brought *popcorn*. I was their freak sideshow act for the night. Down below, Calypso rounded her hands over her mouth, shouting, “Time to jump, Two! We don’t have all night!”

Xander scowled. “Don’t let them get in your head. The best thing you can do is stay focused on getting to the shore as quickly as possible.” His voice had turned calm, a trait of his that only occurred when he was afraid and trying not to show it. If there was nothing to worry about, he’d crack jokes or make fun of me, and he wasn’t doing either of those things.

Reina pulled me away from Xander, offering her own advice. “Ignore those petty bitches. The less attention you give them, the more disappointed they’ll be.”

But Riley was hard to ignore. She sat perched in her lawn chair like it was a throne, watching one of her subjects get beheaded, her cool gaze lit with undeniable satisfaction. In that moment, I hated her. Destroying her didn’t sound half bad, curse or no curse.

Looking away, I tried to get a grip on myself. I would deal with her later. For now, I had to focus on getting through the inlet.

Reina blew her bangs out of her eyes and gave me a once over. She squeezed my biceps, clicking her tongue. “Not much physical strength, eh?”

“You’re not very good at pep talks.”

She smirked. “I just meant you need to rely on magic. And ditch the toga. It will only slow you down. The mermaids will just rip it off anyway.”

*Rip it off?* Oh, dear god.

At my look of horror, Reina squeezed my hand. “Don’t freak out. You’ve got this, Sheridan.”

“That’s right,” Cassius said from behind her. “Mermaids are child’s play.”

I offered a half-smile, grateful for his enthusiasm, even if I didn’t fully believe him. “Thanks, Cassius.”

This was obviously way worse than they were letting on.

“Do you know how to perform an underwater spell?” Reina said.

“What do you mean?”

“Produce fire underwater. To fend off the mermaids.”

I balled my hands into fists, trying to maintain my composure. Fire magic was a fairly new skill. I knew nothing about using it underwater.

“No, I don’t.” My situation was looking bleaker by the second. Clearly, I hadn’t thought this bet through all the way.

Her mouth twitched, and I caught her worried look right before she shook it off. “It’s fine. You’ll be fine.”

Yeah, I didn’t detect a crap-ton of confidence there. “I’m fish bait, aren’t I?”

At that point, Xander stepped between us, letting out an impatient breath. “I’ve got it from here, Reina.” He steered me back around to face him. “Repeat after me: *liquidus ignis*.”

“*Liquidus ignis*.”

He nodded. “Good. While you say it, become one with the fire. Give it as much strength as you can.”

“Exactly how am I supposed to say the spell if I’m underwater?”

“Find a moment when you’re not. Say it right away or even as you jump. Don’t give the mermaids a chance to get to you.”

I looked down at the murky water again, noticing ripples that hadn’t been there before. The mermaids likely knew we were here, just waiting for some fool mage to jump. Waiting for *me*. I was the fool mage because I agreed to a stupid fool’s bet.

“Maybe I’ll get lucky and they won’t want my beauty.”

This stupid fool mage could still hope.

Xander reached for me and pressed his lips hard against mine. I raised my brows, caught off guard by the kiss. His magic flowed through me, building confidence along with sparks of heat in my lower belly. He pulled away just as quickly, his gaze tinged with desire and something else. Fear. “That’s not possible,” he said, trying to hide it. “So you had better swim fast.”

My cheeks flushed. “Thanks, gladiator.”



“If anything happens, I’ll come for you,” he reassured me, his voice shaky.

“Please don’t.” I gestured to the surrounding students. Nearly every Ares House member was here, watching for sport. “You have to let me do this on my own.”

House Ares demanded both bravery and independence. If Xander helped me, I would always be seen as his weak, defenseless girlfriend. I didn’t want that for either of us.

I moved toward the ledge, each step growing heavier than the last. Squeezing my eyes shut, I tore off my toga, stripping down to my underwear. A dozen or so whistles and cheers came my way, along with a few irritating catcalls. I blocked them out, focusing on the water below. Rippling, murky, without sign of mermaids.

“Good luck, Sheridan!” Reina called out from behind me. Cassius cheered with her. For people I’d just met, their blind support made me adore them.

Unlike his friends, Xander didn’t stick around to watch. He made his way back down the hill, getting ready to meet me at the inlet’s shore. I knew he wanted to get down there quickly, in case anything went wrong. Even though I told him not to help, he probably wouldn’t respect my wishes. If shit hit the fan, he would come for me. My strategy was to jump fast, before he had the chance to intervene. It would take him a minute or two to climb down, and that meant I had some time while he couldn’t see what was happening.

Pebbles shook free where I stepped, creating more ripples. I squatted low, wanting to propel myself as far as possible. That way, it wouldn’t be such a long swim and the mermaids would have less opportunity to catch me.

*Here goes nothing.*

I took one last shaky breath and jumped, the crowd around me falling silent. I chanted the spell as Xander instructed, hoping I got it right.

Fire soared around me like a cocoon of heat. Seconds later, I submerged into an icy blast of water. The fire extinguished instantly. The bone-chilling temperature distracted me, causing me to lose my hold on the spell. Lovely. Time for Plan B—swim *fast*.

Now defenseless, I stroked my way back to the surface, praying I got there in time to repeat the spell before the mermaids found me. I emerged from the surface, gasping and swallowing air. “*Liquidus—*”

Before I could finish, my head was yanked back by my hair.

*No!*

The mermaids attacked quickly. Beneath the water it was too dark to see in any direction, but their skin glowed like moonlight, swishing around me faster than eels. I counted at least three, including the one gripping my hair. They were not like mermaids from fairy tales. These kind looked like they’d emerged straight from a nightmare; rows of razor-sharp teeth, bulbous, hungry eyes, and their tails felt like sandpaper scraping against my legs.

“A remarkable color.” The one who had my hair yanked harder, as if she were trying to rip it from my scalp. “I *want* it.”

Her voice was lyrical, a siren call moving in waves of delight. Even through the pain, the way she spoke made me want to give her whatever she desired.

“Yessss,” said one of the others, fanning her talon-like fingers down the side of my arm. “And her skin is so soft.”

Her nails dug into my flesh, drawing blood.

“Share the spoils, sisters,” the third hissed, her yellow eyes blazing. All three reached for me, their greedy fingers clawing. They scratched me over and over, as if they were trying to flay the skin from my bones. I ground my

teeth together to keep from crying out, knowing I'd swallow saltwater if I did.

My hair was ripped from my scalp. Teeth gnawed against my skin. The pain was excruciating.

"She's a fighter." The yellow-eyed sounded impressed.

A fighter—ha! If I was a better one, I would scourge their inlet until it was dried up and there was nothing left but fish bones and ash. But every time I managed to knock one of them aside, another was there to get me, and I was running short on oxygen. I wouldn't last much longer.

*Think. Think. Think.*

I'd read books on sea magic, a few on sea creatures—was there anything useful in them? I combed through the files of my mind, panicking because I needed air.

The ancient text, *Tales of Symbol Magic*, came to me. Diagrams appeared in my head, one for shields, another to harness an energy blast. I didn't waste time debating how they worked, but I mimicked the symbols with my hands, circling my wrists, and steering my fingers in perfect execution from the book.

Pressure rose up from beneath me, causing the mermaids to stop their attack. "What is happening?"

The pressure mounted, and the water formed a barrier around me. "She's a mage!" the other hissed, just as they were blasted outward. The magic worked like a bomb, sending the mermaids spiraling through the water.

As soon as they were gone, I swam toward the surface. Gasping for breath, I lingered there for several long moments, staring at the full moon overhead, grateful to feel the air going in and out of my lungs. It was frightening to think about, but had I been down there a few more seconds, I wouldn't have made it back.

Eventually, I forced my aching body to move again, heading to the shore. Digging my fingers into the muddy ground, I pulled myself up, thrilled to be out of the water. Sorrows—ha! They should call it Inlet of Horrors.

But thank god, it was over. I paid up in full on that bet, and I walked away without once looking back, hoping to never encounter another mermaid ever again.

Now, to deal with the mages.

All of their eyes were on me, making me feel self-conscious. Absently, I noticed the way my hair no longer touched my shoulders. What was left of it was matted to my scalp in short patches. Two of my fingernails were dug from the nailbeds. Blood mixed with salt water dripped from my rough, scratched skin. I hissed at one particularly bad scrape on my foot, glancing down at it.

Oh no, my *legs*.

They were a sickly green color. I drew up my arms, finding they were the same awful color. God, I must look like the Loch Ness monster.

Squaring my shoulders, I tried to not think about my appearance. I kept my eyes on the ground, putting one sopping foot in front of the other. It was over, I survived, and that was all that mattered.

Once the crowd of onlookers saw me up close, several gasps were drawn, accompanied by a slow, uneven applause. They seemed more impressed than disgusted. I should've guessed. Strength outweighed beauty in House Ares, and it looked like I fought off the mermaids with my bare hands. Little did they know, knowledge was what truly saved me. *Thanks, bibliomagery.*

Riley may have won this round, but she hadn't knocked me out for good. Not by a long shot. Speaking of...I looked around for her, wondering what she thought of my survival. I scanned the shore, but she wasn't there. Farther off, I glimpsed her red toga. She had packed up and was already

halfway back to campus! Apparently, my dear sister didn't care whether I lived or died.

Xander suddenly appeared at my side. His arms came around me, cocooning me in his warmth. "You didn't give me enough time to get down. You almost..." He stopped, too choked to finish. I'd never heard that much emotion in his voice. He always held it together, always kept a straight face.

"Don't." I shook my head, not wanting him to beat himself up. "You couldn't help me. You know that."

Had he jumped in, it would have saved me a thrashing, but it would have cost me more in the long run.

"Your life is worth more than their approval," he said, anger replacing the fear in his voice.

"I did what I had to."

Being an outcast again was not an option, not while my murderous sister was building her own army.

"The spell I gave you didn't hold, did it?" He shook his head. "I should've known it was too advanced. That's how they got to you."

I pulled back, without meeting Xander's probing gaze. I didn't want him to own any part of what happened tonight. All of this, including the consequences, fell solely on my shoulders.

Reina and Cassius caught up to us, both of them breathless. The look in their gazes were enough to tell me I was a hot mess. Reina handed me my toga, and I tugged it on, trying to shield myself. I didn't want anyone, especially Xander, to see me like this. Bloody and bruised. Ugly.

Cassius cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the obvious tension. "Nice work, Thorne," he said proudly. "You showed those sea bitches who's boss, eh?"

Xander glared at him. "She almost *died*, Cass."

"Just trying to lighten the mood," Cassius said, frowning. "But she *should* be proud of herself. Not many mages could pull off what she did, not

at her skill level.”

Grudgingly, Xander conceded that. “True enough.” He turned back to face me, his eyes tightening at the corners. “What happened down there?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Xander. Please...just don’t look at me.”

I couldn’t stand it, seeing all the horror in his face. So, I walked away. I felt awful, but those mermaids had stolen more than my beauty. They managed to take some dignity too.

“Sheridan, come on,” Xander called after me. “You know I think you’re beautiful, no matter what.”

Pretty words, but I wasn’t in the right headspace to hear them. All I could think of was the way he liked to stroke my hair, and the way he gently touched the side of my face, gazing at me as if I were a precious commodity. He might claim it didn’t matter, but Xander liked my appearance well enough. And as shallow as it was, beauty meant a great deal in Aphrodite too. Now mine was gone.

Xander quickly caught up to me. “Hold on a sec.” His hand came around my arm, and I hissed at the sting from the scratches. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“I just had my ass handed to me, Xander.”

“It happens,” he said, with way more patience than I had left. “Not every match is a win. We win some and we learn from our losses. That’s the Ares way.”

I snorted. That wasn’t *my* way. Curling up in bed with a pile of books, crying for days, and trying to forget this ever happened sounded like the best road to recovery.

“There are spells that can help with healing—”

“Xander, *stop*.” My tone came out sharper than I intended. I appreciated what he was trying to do, but right now, I needed him to back off. “I want to be alone. I’ll see you later.” I shrugged out of his grip.

He let me leave, but I caught the pained look in his gaze before I walked away. As if I'd slapped him. Ugh, it only made me feel more horrible than I already did.

But I needed space. To wallow. To hide in shame. I would deal with the world again tomorrow, if I was brave enough. Tomorrow was a new day, after all. Hopefully, one with less hiccups.

“SHERIDAN!” IONE WOKE ME WITH A STARTLED GASP. “WHAT HAVE YOU *done* to yourself?”

I slit my eyes open, not ready to wake up and face the day just yet. It took me a few seconds to register what she was going on about. Then I remembered, bits of the previous night coming back to me, and I wished I hadn’t.

“Gods—your skin!” Ione’s face contorted in horror. She lifted my arm and let it fall back on the mattress, cringing at the dried blood and the overall *greenness* of it. “What happened?”

“I needed a makeover. You like it?”

Her eyes flashed, letting me know she didn’t consider this a joking matter. “You look like a beat-up toad.”

“Good, that’s exactly the look I was going for.”

She sat next to me on the bed, twisting one of my shortened locks of hair. “Tell me the whole story. Start from the beginning.”

I told her everything. She listened with wide eyes, truly devastated by what Riley and those mermaids had done.

After I was through, she set to work on mending my appearance with various potions and spells. To start, an elixir that would make my hair grow



back by sunset. Next, a healing lotion for my skin. Then, an overall radiance and renewal spell. All of it, bringing me back, little by little.

Once she was finished, Ione looked me over with a sigh. “I can camouflage the green until it fades on its own, which should take a few days. The cuts won’t leave scars. You can thank your lucky stars for that.”

The cuts bothered me least of all. They reminded me, when it came to Riley, not to make stupid mistakes ever again. But the rest came as a wonderful surprise. I thought I would have to wait weeks to look and feel semi-normal again. “Thank you, Ione.”

“What were you thinking?” She said with a tsk.

“I thought I saw an opportunity.” My chance to get Riley to talk had vanished faster than it appeared. “I was wrong.”

“That sister of yours deserves to be locked-up on Winter Island.”

The Mythonian prison would be an ideal place for Riley. I wouldn’t mind seeing her behind bars, but I would rather find a way to trap her in the Underworld for six months. Then, I could truly be done with her.

“To be this cruel...” I sighed, lost for explanations. “She isn’t the person I remember. Then again, it wasn’t like me to try to kill her either. The curse is poisoning us both.”

“At least one of you is self-aware.”

“Oh, Riley knows exactly what’s happening. She just doesn’t care.”

“And what about my brother?” Ione tapped her foot against the rug. “How could he stand by and allow this to happen?”

“To be fair, I didn’t give him much choice.” Xander’s pained face filled my mind again, and the guilt flooded back. “He didn’t want me to take that bet in the first place.”

“He should have carried you out of that house and never looked back. On Zeus’s grave, Sheridan. Why you feel the need to be part of House Ares is beyond me.”

“It’s in my blood, Ione.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but a knock came at our door, and an envelope flew out of the mail slot. Ione bent down, arching a brow. “It’s for you.” She handed it to me. “From Professor Thorne.”

I hadn’t heard from Grandpa since Riley first arrived at Arcadia. If there was news from him, it meant there was news about Dad! I tore it open straight away.

*Sheridan,*

*As I suspected, your father’s disappearance involved foul play. I found him in your Davidson home, locked under an entrapment spell set by your sister. The spell prevented him from leaving the house or contacting anyone for help. Don’t worry though, I reversed it and freed him. He’s doing okay, for the most part. His pride is suffering. Being tricked and outmatched by his teenage daughter will have that effect.*

*In any case, we are on our way back to Arcadia. However, the journey will take several days longer than usual. Your father can’t travel by portal as the residual effects of the entrapment spell prevent him from using magic until he is fully healed. Again, don’t worry. We’ll be there soon enough.*

*In the meantime, stay away from your sister. Far away! I can safely ascertain she is plotting something. What that something is, I can’t say, but don’t underestimate her abilities. Your father did, and you see where that got him. When I arrive, we will sort this mess out together, as a family. Until then, stay safe, Sheridan.*

*Love,*

*Grandpa*

The letter crumpled between my fingers. How *dare* she. Imprisoning our own father! My god, the lengths Riley would go to see me killed were

endless. And here I was, blaming Dad for sending me here with no communication, and the whole time, he was trapped inside of our house.

I needed to sit down.

“Everything okay?” Ione eyed me cautiously as I lowered onto my bed.

“It will be.”

Blood boiled in my veins. The Fates were wrong about my future. House Ares wouldn’t be the catalyst that pushed me over the edge.

Riley was.



By breakfast, my rose gold locks were already touching my shoulders. As far as my appearance went, it was almost as if last night never happened. *Almost*. But just like Dad, my pride was suffering. I would’ve preferred lazing the day away in bed, moping. Then I thought of Riley gloating, and I thought better of it. I needed to go to class, keep my head held high, and put one foot in front of the other. I needed her to believe I was stronger than she thought.

In Basic Magic Principles, Jett sat in the seat next to me before class started. I hadn’t spoken to her since my abduction, nor did I care to do so.

“What are you doing?” I looked around. Plenty of empty chairs were vacant. Gah, this was what I got for being prideful.

Jett slung her velvet tote along the back of her chair. She looked different. Bags colored the underside of her eyes, like she hadn’t slept in weeks. Her short black hair stuck up in odd places. Even her magic felt different. Less invasive, and more *invaded*. “Er, I was hoping...well, I’d like to be friends again.”

This had to be a joke. “Seriously?”

She traded me for magic. For her to suggest we be friends again after that could only mean one thing. She had clearly lost her mind.

“I miss you, Thorny.” She said it so quietly and sincerely I almost believed her. But there was no trusting Jett. I learned that lesson the hard way. A lesson I didn’t care to repeat.

“No thanks.”

I hoped she would get the hint and leave me alone. She didn’t.

“I know what I did was wrong—”

“Wrong isn’t a strong enough a word.” I straightened my spine, every muscle in my body growing tense. “You nearly got me killed, Jett.”

“Believe me, I’m paying for it. This is harder than I ever expected. Hearing the voices of the dead—it never stops. I can’t escape it or shut them out. The last few weeks have been a living hell.”

What an ironic twist of fate. She had her biggest wish granted, but she was suffering because of it. “I don’t feel sorry for you.”

Her cool gray eyes tightened. “I suppose I deserve that.”

“That and more.”

“So do you think we can be friends again?”

“Try reading my mind.”

*Screw you.*

Jett rolled her eyes, sighing. “Look, I genuinely feel bad about what happened, but what’s done is done.”

*You can shove your fake apology right up your—*

“It’s not fake, but believe what you want. Anyway, I have something for you. A gift from your mom.”

“Oh, the two of you still keep in contact. How nice.” That, at least, made sense. They were peas in a pod, both evil as sin.

Jett slid a brown box wrapped in twine across my desk. “She said if you ever need her, all you have to do is ask.”

“Isn’t she a peach.”

Jett frowned. “I really am sorry, Thorny.”

“Why should you be? You got what you wanted.”

“True. I don’t know if I regret it...but I am sorry I hurt you. I really enjoyed being your friend. You know, if—”

“Class is starting.” I refused to listen to any more of this. She could be sorry all she wanted. What was the saying? Fool me once, shame on you—I was done being the fool mage.

I took the box though, shoving it into my bag. For better or worse, Petra might eventually prove useful. And unlike Jett, she would never try to kill me. If I ever managed to convince Riley to go to the Underworld, Mommy Dearest’s help would be crucial.

And if I couldn’t convince Riley? Well, I was liking the idea of destroying her more and more.

THE DAY PASSED IN A SERIES OF DROLL LECTURES AND BUSY WORK. MY riding instructor, Master Barnes, hadn't given our class permission to ride the Pegasus descendants yet, insisting we dedicate the first semester to textbook instruction. We poured over the differences between breeds, all while I stared wistfully toward the stables. Students who owned their own winged horses were allotted riding time in the evenings, Ione being one of those students, and I was green with envy.

I tried talking to Xander in Weaponry, but he cut me off before I had the chance. Throughout class, he avoided eye contact and barely spoke two words to me. I didn't analyze it, too concerned with my sister's calculated gaze. When it was time to choose a sparring partner, she came for me. My blood turned cold as she marched across the field, laser focused.

I grabbed hold of the person nearest to me, Lev Lemons, and quickly partnered up with him. Riley's hazel eyes flashed as she approached. "Really, Sher? Lev is the scrawniest kid here."

Lev scowled at the blatant insult. He wasn't scrawny by normal standards, only compared to other Ares students.

"He'll do fine."

I stayed locked on her, like she was a snake about to strike at any second. After the mermaids, I trusted her even less than before. Even worse,

I didn't trust myself. I wasn't sure I could be near Riley without losing my temper. Sparring would no doubt send me over the edge, and I promised myself I wouldn't go to that dark place again, no matter how hard she pushed.

The back of my neck tingled, and I looked behind me. Xander was watching the two of us, every muscle in his body stiff. He would be worried, and I didn't want to worry him anymore than I already had.

Riley coughed to regain my attention. "Wouldn't you like to actually hone your skills, Sheridan?"

Lev sputtered. "Now see here—"

"Don't bother, Lev," I said, keeping my gaze focused on Riley. "This isn't about you. She's baiting me."

One corner of her mouth curved. "Not at all. What kind of sister would I be if I didn't have your back?"

"Don't you mean, stab me in the back?"

She shrugged. "In this family, what's the difference?"

Sensing the tension, Lev stepped away. I lowered my voice so neither he nor anyone else around us could hear. "I know what you did, Riley. To *Dad*. If we fought right now, I couldn't stop myself from killing you."

An emotionless, cool smile pulled at her lips. "It wouldn't be the first time you've tried."

"This time I might succeed." I ground my teeth together, infuriated at her for pushing this hard. In the open, no less, with a class full of spectators.

She stared at me for several long seconds, until it became clear she wasn't backing down. I couldn't fall prey to her tricks. I had to wait for Grandpa and Dad, so we could work this out as a family. Until then, I would do everything in my power to stop the curse from manifesting.

"Go away." I turned my back on her.

As I left, several groans of disappointment sounded. I ignored them, telling myself it wasn't worth the fight. Besides, everyone knew about the

mermaids. They knew I wasn't weak.

After class, I tried approaching Xander again. His blue eyes drifted over me for the briefest of seconds. "Are you okay?" He must be referring to last night.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I forced a breath. "Your sister patched me up."

"Good." He swallowed. "But hey, I'm late for my next class. I'll catch up with you later."

Frowning, I nodded. "Okay."

My shoulders slumped as he rushed off. I couldn't blame the guy. I'd probably avoid me too.

I tried not to worry over it.

*If* that were possible.



THE REST OF THE DAY PASSED TOO SLOWLY FOR COMFORT, AND MY MIND wandered in different directions.

Zack was late getting to the gateway room for our Mirror Realm period. Idly drumming my fingers against Petra's package, I sat alone on the stone floor, surrounded by endless mirrors serving as portals between realms. In one of them, my subject, Mia, listened to a Physics lesson. Much like myself, she fidgeted in an antsy, restless manner.

I stopped drumming and looked away from her, figuring I might as well open the package. Otherwise, I'd never give Mia and Ben the attention they deserved.

I pulled at the string and tore the lid from the box. Inside was a leather-bound notebook with a black quill attached. I opened the book, flipping through the pages. All were blank.

"Haven't seen one of those in years." Master Themus's deep, bellowing voice startled me, causing me to nearly jump up off the floor. The elderly gatekeeper often lurked in the shadows, preferring to stay out of sight and away from students. Since I first started coming here, he hadn't spoken more than a few words to me.

I swallowed, narrowing in on his dark, hunched silhouette. "Do you know what it is?" I asked him.

“Course I do. It’s a parchwyn.”

“A what?”

“It allows two people to communicate through writing. You pen your message, and the other scribe replies. Their words appear in your book, yours in theirs.”

“Ah.” I grasped the basic mechanisms. “In the human world, we have texting for that.”

“The book carries your words in secret. No one else can read what you have written, and the same goes for the receiver. Many used them during the Uprising. Back then, they were worth their weight in gold.”

“Interesting.” I picked up the quill, wondering how it could write without ink.

“You must prick your finger,” Master Themus instructed me. “Allow a few drops of your blood to bleed onto the page.”

I nodded. “Like a security code.”

Master Themus shrugged, then disappeared behind a mirror.

I looked down at the book again. Zack still hadn’t arrived. I had some time to kill. Before I could overthink it, I grabbed the quill and pricked my index finger. Several drops of red blood fell onto the page, disappearing instead of leaving a stain.

I blinked. After a few seconds, words appeared. Blurry at first, and then they sharpened as if they were being written before my eyes.

*Hello Daughter,*

*I hope this parchwyn finds you well. It has come to my knowledge that your sister enrolled at Arcadia. While my first instinct was to act swiftly, I have had time to reflect on your feelings. In fact, I have thought many times over about how we left things. I don’t like that we parted on bad terms.*

*I know you don't want to end Riley's life, but at the same time, I fear for yours. Everything I sacrificed was for you to have a better one. It pains me to think it could all be for nothing. That being said, I don't want you to suffer the loss of your sibling either. Therefore, I will accept the bargain you offered. I won't make any attempts on her life. For now.*

*There are a few mages skilled with curses here in the Underworld. I will ask around to see if anything can be done. Or rather, undone. Try to find some other remedy, if it exists. If one can't be found, well, then I must carry on with my original plan. I refuse to lose you again. But my darling girl, I hope it will not come to that.*

*If you ever need me, I am here, ready to read anything you wish to write about. Even if all you want to do is vent, send me your list of grievances. I will happily read anything you write. Tell me, how have you been?*

*Love always,  
Your Mom*

I looked away from the notebook, swallowing a deep breath. Petra telling me she wouldn't kill Riley came as an enormous relief. Because if anyone could do it, *she* could.

For a while I sat there, wondering how to reply. Or even if I should. I drummed my fingertips along the blank page, going over Petra's last line in my head.

*Tell me, how have you been?*

I didn't know why, but it felt strange yet comforting that she wanted to hear about my little life. Finally, I took the quill in hand, penning a few short lines.

*Mom,*

That already looked weird. I scratched it out, thinking about what to call her. Addressing her as my mother didn't sound right, but neither did Petra. Maybe I was overthinking this.

P—

*Thanks for the parchwyn. Also, thanks for not killing my sister. As far as my part of that bargain goes, I've found a way to dual-enroll in both Aphrodite and Ares classes. How, you may ask? Well, you'll be delighted to know your daughter is a geniox. I'm sure you are as surprised as I was to discover this. (If anyone asks, tell them genioxes run in our family tree.)*

*In other news, I've summoned my soul weapon. They say that's a pretty big deal for a first year. It's a bow and quiver of arrows. I'll have to take up archery now—ironic considering I have my own archer in Aphrodite.*

*About the curse...I've been using my bibliomagery to research. Have you heard of Persephone's Cure? I read about it in a book from Twilight Island. If it's legitimate, it could be the answer we're looking for.*

-S

Satisfied with what I'd written, I took another deep breath. That breath was shakier than I anticipated. Petra's approval didn't matter. Or, at least, it shouldn't. She was a means to an end. Someone who could help me lift this curse. That's *all*. I didn't care about her or what she thought. I certainly didn't care if she was proud I summoned a soul weapon. Why had I even bothered telling her that?

"Hey, sorry I'm late!"

I glanced up as Zack bounded around the corner, his brown curls flying.

“No biggie.” I slammed the parchwyn shut and stuffed it back into its box. “Ready to get started?”

He stopped to catch his breath, his cherubic cheeks flushed. If I didn’t know he was over one hundred, I’d swear he was the cutest kid I’d ever seen. “Yes, but I hear we’re both archers now,” he said with a wink. “Do you even need me?”

Blood rushed to my own cheeks. “My arrows aren’t full of lust.”

“Then what good are they?”

“They’re pretty good at making one bleed.”

He shook his head, letting out a mock sigh. “Come on, Sheridan. Time to take off your Ares cap, so we can help these humans fall in love.”

I gestured toward our mirror. “I can wear both caps.”

“We’ll see about that.” He snorted. “Have you named it yet?”

I trailed my fingers over the golden bow, settling over the glittering gemstones. “I have a name in mind.”

“Say it aloud.”

“*Polaris.*”

As soon as the name left my lips, the bow and quill vanished. As easy as that.

“Now, onto more pressing matters.”

“Right.” *Mia and Ben.* “Lead the way.”

We stepped into the Mirror Realm, and my stomach immediately tied into knots—because Mia was feeling the same way. Zack once mentioned I would begin picking up on my subjects’ emotions. I thought it would be good to know how they felt, but the ability added another distracting layer to this dimension, making it that much harder to focus.

We arrived during a tutoring session. The two of them sat with their desks opposite each other, and Mia went over the study guide for their next test. Her hormones surged every time she stopped to look at him, but Ben

was clueless. She was the reigning queen of poker faces, keeping her feelings on a tight lock-down.

While watching the two of them together, I tapped my chin, wondering why. What did she have to lose?

“These two are hopeless,” Zack sighed. Even he was getting impatient with their stubbornness, and he’d helped far more people fall in love than I had. “Desperate times call for desperate measures. We need to draft a potion.”

I shook my head. “I have an idea.”

Mia left her desk to get a bottle of water from the school’s vending machine. When she returned, I whispered a spell. “*Inconcinus*.”

As if I’d stuck out my foot, Mia tripped. Ben reacted immediately. He caught Mia just as she was going down, and she landed hard against his chest. The water bottle fell to the floor, unnoticed.

“Are you okay?” He sounded worried.

She stared up at him with her big, brown eyes. A surge of hormones and desire radiated throughout the room. Both Zack and I watched the two of them, on the edge of our metaphorical seats. *Come on, Ben. Don’t blow this opportunity.*

Trouble was, he was used to girls chasing him, not the other way around. I wasn’t confident he could pull this off.

At first, he leaned away, but then he stopped himself. I could see it—the moment he recognized that look in Mia’s eyes.

“Go for it, you idiot,” Zack chanted behind him.

“*Confidentia*,” I whispered, hoping to grant him some courage.

He did it—he moved in close, pressing his lips against Mia’s. Behind him, Zack exploded in cheering. He jumped up and down, clapping his hands together as if he’d never been more thrilled in his life.

I waited a few seconds, gauging Mia’s reaction. When her hands slipped around Ben’s neck, a sigh of relief escaped. Zack rushed me, nearly

knocking me down. I hugged him back, happy tears pooling in my eyes.

He laughed. “Ah, don’t go soft on me, Thorne.”

I quickly wiped my eyes, smiling. I couldn’t help it. Winning felt good, and this felt like winning. As small as the moment was, I knew I would be proud of it forever.

Once Zack settled down, he said, “What made you think to do that?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Sometimes, it pays off to be the damsel.”

He, of course, had no idea what I was talking about.

“I knew if she fell, he would be right there to catch her,” I explained. “That’s just the kind of thing guys like to do for their ladies.”

“How did you know Mia would crack?”

“I didn’t.” Their kiss deepened, sending waves of pulsating desire throughout the room. “But I figured if I could get them touching, she wouldn’t be able to hide it any longer—maybe we should give them some privacy.”

Zack grinned. “It’s not like they can take it much further. Bet you the next study session takes place on a living room sofa!”

“You’re on,” I said as I headed toward the portal. “And for the record, I hope it’s a bet you win.”

XANDER WENT MIA FOR THE REST OF THE EVENING. HE NEVER CAME to the courtyard where we always ate dinner together. Apparently, my own love life was not as easy to manage. Too upset to eat, I gave my plate full of untouched spaghetti and meatballs to Birch.

The worst part was having to walk back to my dorm alone. Since there was no telling when Riley would conjure her next monster, Xander usually tagged along. But tonight, I went solo. The campus grounds were darker than usual, too. Shadows danced across the sidewalk. Leaves bristled against the trees. Even the night winds moaned a distant warning, but I wasn't afraid. I simply missed Xander's presence, and the way he held my hand as if it were the most precious thing in the world.

Just as I released a small sigh, I felt it. Familiar, magical tingles touching the back of my neck. I spun around, squinting into the dark spaces along the sidewalk.

"Xander?"

He didn't answer. My gaze drifted up into the trees and through the spiral topiary bushes. He was nowhere to be found. Nowhere I could find him anyway. He clearly had no intention of revealing himself.

"I'm sorry," I whispered against the cool night air.

Utter silence.



Fine, let him avoid me. Picking up the skirt of my toga, I carried on my way. He may not want to speak to me, but at least he cared enough to make sure I made it back to my dorm safely. That had to mean something.

Just as I rounded the corner to House Aphrodite, I stopped short, my heart slamming into my chest.

Three dark figures blocked the sidewalk, all of them dressed in black, with swords strapped to their backs. The hoods of their capes shadowed their faces, but their magic stood out like a flashing beacon. Sharp, cold, and invasive—it kept me frozen in place. I tried to step backward, but it felt as if my sandals were glued to the cement.

Maybe I should have been afraid.

I wondered what they wanted. This clearly wasn't Riley's doing. She was limited to summoning monsters, not assassin swordsmen.

"Sheridan Thorne of House Aphrodite?" one of them said in a gravelly voice.

*They're here for me.*

I debated how best to convince them that I was anyone else. Before I could answer, footsteps padded across the concrete from behind me. Xander emerged from the shadows, swiftly moving between me and the swordsmen.

Aha—I *knew* he had been following me.

His presence alone was calming, given the situation. He kept his gaze laser focused on the three mysterious figures. "Leave." His tone was deadlier than I'd ever heard it. "Now."

Unlike myself, he seemed immune to their penetrating magic.

The middle one unleashed his sword. Xander muttered, "*Dragontooth*," and his appeared in his hand, glowing a subtle blue.

"We can't harm him," said the one on the right.

A silent standoff lasted for several seconds, and I held my breath the entire time. It finally ended with a small nod from the middle swordsman.

He sheathed his sword. Then, the three of them disappeared almost as fast as they had arrived.

Once they were gone, I swallowed huge lungfuls of air and stretched out my limbs. Their magic was unlike any other I'd experienced. I wasn't sure what just happened, but a hundred different questions flooded my mind.

I looked to Xander for answers, but he didn't offer any. "Go straight to your room, Sheridan."

"Who are those swordsmen—"

"Do it before they decide to come back."

Before I could stop him, he disappeared behind the trees. I gritted my teeth to keep from screaming. No explanations. Only orders. This was *not* okay.

I rushed up the stairs of House Aphrodite, taking them two at a time. I wanted to tell Ione, but when I got to the dorm, she wasn't there. Out again, at yet another party. Ugh. I had hoped she might know something.

I looked around the empty room and let out a frustrated groan, my hands still trembling. They knew my *name*.

They were obviously looking for me, but nothing about it made any sense, and Xander acted as if I should pretend it never happened. Ha! Like that was even possible.

Throughout the night, I tossed and turned in bed until I couldn't take it anymore. I considered impressing more books, but I wasn't focused enough. My mind was firing in a million different directions, too scrambled for bibliomagery. Instead, I reopened the parchwyn.

I blinked, surprised. Petra's reply was already there waiting.

*I haven't heard of Persephone's Cure, but I will do some digging to see if I can find out anything.*

*As far as your other news goes, I am blown away. I didn't receive my soul weapon until my junior year. Your father didn't receive his until the beginning of his senior year. For you to achieve it at such a young age is incredible. Be proud of yourself, Sheridan. I certainly am!*

## ❧ II ❧

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, I JOLTED UPRIGHT IN BED, MY HEART racing. An important detail came to me about the swordsmen. As they left, their black robes had swished behind them, a gold emblem flashing—one I'd seen before. In books, and on my mother's robe. It was the serpent of the Underworld.

Hollows had come to Arcadia.

Looking for *me*.

I swallowed and lay back against my pillows, waiting for my heart to slow to a normal rate. While staring at the ceiling, I tried putting the pieces together.

Petra wouldn't have sent them. They had forced her own pledge upon her, and she made it clear she didn't want the same life for me.

I doubted this had anything to do with Riley either. She was after my blood, but as far as I knew, she wasn't connected to powers *that* dark.

But if neither of them, then who? There were still so many unanswered questions.

Sleeping was impossible. The wheels in my mind whirled until daylight streamed in from the balcony and it was nearly time to go to class. Sighing, I threw my covers aside and got ready for the day.

When I returned from the bathroom, Ione was awake. She came back from her party pretty late last night, stumbling inside the room, and practically falling into her bed. “You’re up early.” She yawned and stretched.

“Couldn’t sleep.” I wondered if I should mention the swordsmen or keep it to myself. Maybe I should wait until I spoke with Xander. “Have fun last night?”

She shrugged half-heartedly. “It was okay.”

“Did you get to see Peter?” I asked in a very obvious, pointed manner.

She stared at me for several long, intense seconds. This was followed by a roll of her eyes. “He told you, didn’t he?”

“Told me what?”

Her expression darkened. “Don’t toy with me, Sheridan.”

“He may have mentioned something about unrequited love.”

“I’m not surprised.” She stood up, still in her toga from the night before. “He thinks this will make a difference. Well, guess what? It doesn’t.” She went to her vanity, rifling through her drawers, waving off the subject as if that were the end of it.

“First of all, he barely told me anything.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Second, I’m a little hurt that you told me *nothing*.”

She looked back to arch a brow at me. “Hurt?”

“Um, yeah.” I spoke as if it were a *duh* moment. “We’re supposed to be friends. Boy talk was a given.”

Ione snorted and continued gathering her shower supplies. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“You sure about that?”

She slid the strap of her bag over her shoulder, threw on some flip-flops, and grabbed a towel. “Peter is delusional.” She headed for the door. “But if there’s ever a boy to talk about, you’ll be the first to know. Promise.”

With that said, she slipped out into the hall before I could ask any more questions. I pressed my lips together, noticing how much effort she put into evading the conversation. Nothing going on, my ass. Whatever. If she wanted to be secretive, that was her prerogative.

I dragged through the morning, a paranoid zombie in a toga. Every shadow caught my eye. Every corner made me pause. Every Hades descendant made me do a double-take because their black togas reminded me of the swordsmen's capes. Between classes, I ordered a large cup of coffee from the snack cart and tried to pull myself together.

Once I got to Weaponry, I was determined to speak to Xander. Leaving a few minutes early, I spotted him along the path to the Ares training field. "Hey." I fell into step beside him. "Funny how we keep running into each other."

He didn't even crack a smile. Instead, he ran a hand through his hair, looking very distracted.

"What happened last night?" I cut straight to the chase.

He shook his head. "Now isn't a good time."

I clenched my hands into fists, boiling beneath the surface. He couldn't keep doing this. Leaving me in the dark—it wasn't *fair*.

"What's going on, Xander? Stop avoiding me."

"You asked for space, remember?" A twinge of resentment filled his tone.

Clearly, he was still upset about the mermaids. I'd done the same thing by shutting him out. But that was a totally different situation, one that affected me more than it did him. Even so, being on the other side of it wasn't fun.

I let out a breath, instinctively knowing I needed to make this right. "Not *this* much space." I reached out and touched his arm. "Xander, is everything okay?"

He nodded, still staring off into the distance. “Yeah, fine. Everything is fine.” Even his voice was far away.

“Then tell me who those men were, and don’t you dare try and ignore me again or avoid my questions.”

He stopped walking to look around, as if he were afraid of someone following him.

“Fine, but not here.” He grabbed my hand, guiding me off the sidewalk and well out of earshot of passersby.

The way he was acting, the edginess and distraction, wasn’t like him and it made me nervous. Once we found some privacy, Xander stopped, keeping his voice low. “The swordsmen were members of the Hollowed Guard.”

I nodded, having already put that much together. “I noticed their emblems. Why were they at Arcadia?”

His blue eyes, clouded with worry, struggled to focus. “I don’t know for sure...but I can guess.”

I wondered at his evasiveness. “Care to share it aloud for the class?”

He frowned; he obviously didn’t *want* to tell me, and that stung more than I cared to admit. I tilted my head to the side, softening my voice. “Xander, you can trust me.”

“This has nothing to do that. I already trust you.”

He said it so quickly, I believed him. “Then why won’t you tell me?”

“Because you have enough to worry about. I don’t want to put more on your plate.”

The curse, dealing with Riley—he was trying to spare me. I should’ve guessed. “Let me decide what I can handle.”

He looked at the sky, and then back at me, as if he were gathering strength. “Can’t you accept you’re better off not knowing?”

I snorted, and he rolled his eyes. “Figures,” he sighed. “Okay, just remember you asked for this.”

“Go on—out with it.”

“I believe my father sent them.”

Slowly, I backed away from him. “Your father...why?”

“The man has attacked every person I’ve ever cared about. Ione, my mother, and even Chloe. I was an idiot to think he’d finally given up.”

Chloe.

Ione mentioned her before, back on Twilight Island. Aside from me, Chloe was the only girl Xander had ever dated. Ione told me about her, and how their relationship ended abruptly.

*I was so happy to see him find some happiness, some normalcy again, but it was ruined. The hollows made one threat against her life, and he broke up with her on the spot.*

A gnawing fear furrowed in the pit of my stomach, and I wondered if history would repeat itself. God, I didn’t want to consider the possibility.

I shook myself. “Xander, why did they listen to you? When you told them to leave, they didn’t even put up a fight.”

“I’m immune to their power. Always have been. That’s why they used Petra, because they couldn’t torture me themselves.”

Knowing my own mother wielded her magic to hurt Xander still gutted me. The mind tricks she’d played. The things she made him see. I hated that it happened to him, that she was part of the darkest time in his life. Most of all, I hated that I still kind of liked her in spite of it. I should despise her with every fiber of my being, but I didn’t.

“We should get going.” Xander looked back toward the sidewalk. “Will you meet me tonight? Down by the lake where I first told you about your parents?”

The request came out of nowhere, and it made me semi-nervous. As serene as that lake was, I associated it with bad news and shocking revelations. I looked at him pointedly. “Are you breaking up with me?”



“What?” My conclusion caught him off guard. He blinked several times, then laughed. “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Hearing his laughter, as if that was the last thing he expected, put me at ease.

He leaned down to kiss my forehead. “We can talk more there.”

I wondered what more he had to tell me. “Okay.”

“So you’ll come?”

I nodded.

He ran his fingers through my hair, now fully regrown and back to its former glory. I was grateful to have the soft, shiny strands again, and even more grateful for moments like this one.

“See you tonight, damsel.”

There was something different about Xander, something that didn’t quite feel right, but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was. I tried to push the feeling aside, but it bothered me.

ON THE WAY TO MY NEXT CLASS, A ZEUS STUDENT NAMED JONAS GAVE me his seal of support. He handed it to me on the sidewalk as if it were no big deal, as if we weren't making magical warfare transactions out in the open.

Dumbfounded, I just stared and blinked. "Why?"

"I need a love potion," he said simply. "A good one. If you ever use it, that would be my request."

I twisted the gold coin in my fingers, considering that. Potions were simple enough. We didn't use them in Mirror Realm because they created fake emotions that eventually wore off, but Jonas would be aware of how they worked. His direct tone was eager, making me curious why he wanted it, or rather, *who* he wanted it for.

"I'll keep that in mind." Looking around to make sure no one was eavesdropping, I cleared my throat. "What can you, ahem, offer in return?"

"Invisibility." He smirked. "Very rare magic. Only a few accomplished Zeus students are successful at invisibility spells. I'm one of them."

"Like Vanisher's reflector invisibility?" Vanisher transported students to Twilight Island, using his magic to reflect against the water. In most scenarios, reflection wouldn't be very useful.

"No, *actual* invisibility."

Hm, that was pretty spectacular. I wasn't sure when or if I would ever need invisibility, but I supposed it didn't hurt having that particular trick up my sleeve.

I nodded in agreement. "Okay, then. Thank you, Jonas."

As he went on about his way, I shook my head at the strangeness of my situation. I stood there for several long seconds, frozen on the sidewalk, still staring at the golden coin in my palm. I wondered if I would have to use it or Storm's or someone else's, all to survive.

I couldn't imagine my curse leading to an eventual death, but I had to consider the possibility. One of us, either myself or Riley, may end up dying. I hated thinking about it, hated thinking one of us could kill the other, but that's where all of this was headed.

Throughout the rest of the day, I struggled to focus. Thoughts about death consumed me, and I wondered what it was like on the other side. If Jett and I were still friends, I would ask her. She once told me Hades descendants couldn't see the full reality of the deceased, only a small portion. I wanted to know what that portion was like.

When classes were over and dinnertime had come, I ventured down the path that led to the lake where Xander first told me about the curse. For all its beauty, going there to meet him again made my legs tremble.

As I was walking, Xander grabbed my hand, appearing out of nowhere. My heart tripped beneath my chest. "Gah!—you're *always* doing that," I complained, trying to calm my racing heart.

He grinned. "Just keeping you on your toes."

"Trust me, I'm always on my toes in this world..." A yellow blanket several feet behind him caught my attention, distracting me. "What's that?"

"Food."

"Like a picnic?"

He nodded, watching my reaction.

He had spread out a blanket topped with baskets, a bottle of wine, cups and plates. I opened my mouth to say something, but no words came out. I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but it wasn't this.

"This is amazing." My stomach growled. It just occurred to me I hadn't eaten all day in anticipation for this.

Xander led me to the blanket, and we kneeled down on it together. "That's not even the best part—watch this."

Several tealight candles lit up all at once, slowly rising into the air, floating around us.

"How are you doing that?"

Xander's fire magic awed me. He was far more advanced than me.

He shrugged. "Over time, it comes naturally, like the flames exist within you." He watched me closely, just as entranced by my reaction as I was of the candles. "I have another surprise."

I met his gaze, widening my eyes. "It gets *better*?"

He handed me a small velvet box. I took it from him and carefully opened it. Inside was a charm bracelet, almost identical to the one Riley had poisoned. This new one was white gold with only one charm, a light blue stone that sparkled in the candlelight.

"For protection," Xander said, his voice low. "Do you like it?"

I smiled. "Xander, I *love* it."

He beamed, pleased with himself.

I glanced around, at the picnic, and back to the bracelet again. "Is there...any reason for this?"

He raised one thick, dark brow. "What do you mean?"

I wished I could accept it for the romantic gesture it was, but I needed an explanation. "Don't get me wrong, I love that you planned all of this. But you're acting like everything is fine, like you haven't been ignoring me the last two days. You were angry—I know you were."

Xander gently touched the side of my face, his fingertips lightly tracing down my cheek and neck, tingling my skin as if they were electric. “I was angry, but not at you. Maybe at first, but I was angrier with myself.”

“Explain.”

He let out a lengthy sigh, and I could sense he was finally about to let it all out. “You took that bet, and I couldn’t stop you. You jumped off that ledge, and I couldn’t protect you. Then, when you were bloody and bruised, I couldn’t even comfort you. It was the most helpless feeling in the world, damsel. It made me wonder if I was any good to you at all.”

I straightened my spine, the night’s events coming back to me through Xander’s eyes. Even if he had tried, I doubt the outcome would have changed. But his last point, about comforting me...I winced, realizing how he must’ve felt. “I’m sorry,” I said, meaning it. “I was just so ashamed, and I didn’t want you seeing me like that.”

“Listen to me, Sheridan.” His jaw tightened, his blue eyes holding me with their intensity. “I want your best and your worst, your strength and your weakness, your light and your darkness. They’re all pieces of you, and only half is a lie.”

The weight of his words stole my breath. I nodded, wanting the same from him too.

“As far as all of this,” he nodded to our surroundings, “it’s an escape. A chance for us to be *us*. Xander and Sher.”

Our own private bubble.

He unclasped the bracelet, then reached for my wrist. The moment it snapped together, an aura of calm washed over me. “Whoa,” I breathed, picking up on its energy. What a powerful little stone.

“If it makes any difference, you do comfort me.” I swallowed, a little uncomfortable with my own vulnerability, but I knew these were words he needed to hear. “Do you remember what you said that day we went to the bubbles, after I told you I was afraid of my magic?”

He nodded. "I asked you to let me be your anchor."

"Exactly," I breathed out. "You comfort me every day, Xander, by keeping me grounded, by staying constant in a world of chaos. You're the one person I can trust, even when I can't trust myself."

He interlocked his fingers with mine, squeezing my hand. "And I always will be, as long as you let me."

In some ways, getting this close to him terrified me.

Falling this *fast*.

I couldn't help but think of Connor. With him, I felt too much and all at once. Then Riley stole that from me, and my world came crashing down. She had control over Xander too, even if she hadn't yet realized it. If she ever found out ... I shook myself. I couldn't bring myself to go there.

Xander noticed the change in my expression and tilted his head. "What's wrong?"

I decided to be as straightforward as he had with me. "I'm worried about the oath you made to Selena. If Riley finds out—"

"She won't," he promised, cutting me off. "Just keep your distance, and I'll do the same."

"That's kind of hard, considering she's waging war against me."

He offered a sympathetic smile. "We'll figure this out, Sheridan. I swear it to you."

I chewed on the side of my cheek, wanting to believe him. But the longer time went on, the harder it was. I already had to remind myself daily that I didn't *truly* want my sister dead. I only felt that way because the curse was strengthening.

Xander opened a basket and pulled out two sandwiches wrapped in napkins, handing me one. "We're supposed to be forgetting the rest of the world, remember?"

"Oh, right." Our bubble. I peeled the napkin away and held up my sandwich in toast. "To a worry-free night."

He bumped his sandwich against mine, grinning. “Cheers to that.”



We spent the next few hours eating, drinking, and talking about magic. The sun fell on the horizon, time quickly slipping away. Xander and I laid side by side on top of the blanket and stared up at the night sky, our bellies full of food and enchanted wine. We passed what was left of the bottle back and forth, and I began to feel lighter. I didn’t realize how anxious I’d been until the heaviness left. For the first time in a long time, my world was peaceful.

I held my hand up to gaze at my new bracelet. “You would have done well in Aphrodite.”

Xander chuckled, not even bothering to deny it. “I know.”

I handed him the bottle and he tucked it into the crook of his arm. “Do you ever think about what it would be like?”

He turned to look at me. “If I never switched houses?”

I nodded. “Do you have moments you regret it?”

“Never.”

“Really? *Never*?” It was difficult for me to adapt to a life where I could only be one thing, where I could only practice one magic. I found it hard to believe Xander never questioned his own choices.

He shook his head. “I respect love magic, but I don’t have a passion for it. My time in the Underworld changed me. It transformed everything I thought I knew about myself.”

“What were you like before?” He didn’t talk about himself often, much less about the Underworld—and I was intensely curious. It felt as if I were always holding my breath around Xander, waiting for him to reveal a little more.

“Naïve, I guess.” He shrugged. “I believed the world was made of sunshine and daisies.”

I chuckled, unable to picture him like that. “Yeah, right.”

“It’s true.” He leaned up, set the bottle aside, his face serious. “But that kid is long gone. My father made sure of it.”

I pressed my lips together, thinking of everything he’d been through. First, discovering his dad was a hollow. Then, kidnapped and held prisoner in the Underworld for three years where he was repeatedly tortured. After he escaped, his father cursed Ione to force their pledges. A curse she eventually broke, but it cost her the ability to have children. As far as dark mages went, their dad was pretty much the worst one in existence, and that included my own murder happy relatives.

Xander should be damaged beyond repair, but somehow, he rose above his upbringing. He stayed level-headed at all times, and he kept his past hidden from everyone. The guy kind of inspired me. He made my curse look like child’s play by comparison.

“It must’ve come as a shock,” I said carefully, aware I was treading over our usual boundaries. “About your dad, I mean.”

“An understatement.”

He stood and walked to the edge of the lake. I followed along, helping him search for stones. I should probably let the subject drop, but I didn’t know when I’d have another chance to talk to him about this stuff.

“You could tell me, if you want.” I leaned into his side, nudging his arm. “I’m pretty sure I can relate better than anyone else you know.” After all, I knew a thing or two about crappy parents.

Xander gazed at me, guarded at first, but the walls were coming down, little by little. Several long moments passed in silence.

Then he told me everything.

“He was charming, a classic Aphrodite descendant. The guy loved *love*. None of us ever thought he could be who he was; none of us believed him when he came clean. In fact, my mother assumed he’d been spelled or



hexed. It wasn't until we learned he'd been lying to us all along that we realized he was revealing his true self."

"His true self?"

"My father comes from a long line of hollows." He threw a stone across the surface of the lake, watching it skip several times. "He grew up in the Underworld, only leaving with the intention to marry into a powerful family. My mother was his perfect victim; her family was the wealthiest on Summer Island. So, he gave himself a new identity, deceived my mother and everyone else he knew for over a decade. I think he believed he was creating an alliance, but after my mother and her family found out who and what he was, they rejected him. We all did."

I frowned, unable to imagine that kind of betrayal. I had never known my mom, and that made it easier to accept what she was. But Xander was raised by his Dad. To find out the man who raised him wasn't really who he said he was must've been devastating. "I'm sorry, Xander."

He shrugged, as if he'd gotten over it a long time ago. "Now you see why I want nothing to do with my father's magic. When I chose Ares, it was also a message. I wanted him to know I was nothing like him."

That made sense. In a way, I was sending my own message by not choosing a defining magic. I didn't want to be put in a box or modeled after anyone. I just wanted to be *me*.

"But magic doesn't make the mage good or bad," I pointed out. "It's all in how you use it."

"I know, firsthand." He kicked at the pebbles against the lake's edge. "Ione's magic is beautiful. Yours, too. But my father's is vile."

I nodded, feeling like I finally understood a part of him he kept hidden from the rest of the world.

"Anyway, aren't we supposed to be keeping things light?" He grinned, looking devastatingly handsome in the moonlight.

I slid my hand into his, linking our fingers together, the same way he usually did. “Heavy isn’t so bad. This is nice, getting to know this side of you.”

He pulled me close, and I sucked in a breath. “It’s more than nice, damsel.”

Sparks of heat ignited as he pressed his lips against mine. Like always, there was a magnetic force attached to him. Dimly, I felt his body mold to me, our magic entwining like tree roots beneath the ground. There was something unique about the way our magic interacted. It transported us to another world, one far away from this one. When we were like this, the bubble was real. Real enough to make me forget. And real enough to make me want to stay inside of it forever.

“Do you feel that?” Xander whispered, his breath hot on my lips.

I nodded, my forehead brushing his, glad to know I wasn’t the only one.

I’ve been kissed before, by Connor many times, and once by Joey Douglas at a Halloween party in seventh grade, so I grasped the basics of how kisses were supposed to go down. *This* was like nothing I’d ever experienced. It felt like when Xander and I touched, we created our own fusion of magic. “Whatever it is, I like it,” I whispered back.

He grinned. “Me too.”

I WOKE IN MY DORM ROOM, TUCKED BENEATH THE COVERS ON MY BED, warm and cozy. As I stretched, the previous night's memories came back, and I smiled lazily against my pillow. Last night had been *perfect*. Better than perfect.

The last thing I remembered was falling asleep on Xander's chest, and later, vaguely noticing he was carrying me back to campus. It was kind of a long walk to carry a sleeping person, but he managed it like I was a sack of feathers.

I dreamily got ready for the day, then walked out of House Aphrodite, still stuck in my own world. It caught me off guard when Zack jogged up the steps to meet me. "Hey, Sheridan," he said, breathless as usual.

"Hey, Zack. What's up?"

"I have a message for you." His tone was urgent. "Your dad and your grandfather have arrived on Spring Island. They want you to meet them for dinner."

I stopped walking, pressing my hand over my heart. They had made it. "Tell them yes—definitely yes!"

He grinned. "Figured you would be happy about that."

Happy was putting it mildly compared to rush of endorphins and serotonin flooding into me. This was amazing news. The only annoying part

was having to wait until dinnertime.

Classes dragged on, each second slower than the last. In Basic Magic Principles, Jett sat next to me again. This time, I blocked her from reading my thoughts. When the bell rang, she pushed a black rose in front of me, then quietly left. Black roses were the Hades version of an olive branch. I tossed the rose in Professor Ambrosia's wastebasket on my way out of the classroom.

Later, as we walked to class together, I recounted the story to Hazel. I didn't expect much of a reaction. Perhaps, "*that girl has some nerve*" or an eye-roll at best. Instead Hazel's eyes watered, leaving me completely dumbfounded.

"Seriously, Haze? You *hated* her."

She pursed her lips, her shoulders stiffening. "That's not true. I didn't always get along with Jett, but I didn't hate her."

I stared at her pointedly, hardly able to believe what I was hearing. The two of them constantly bickered when we were friends.

"I hate what she did to you." She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, shrugging. "It just sucks...I miss the trifecta."

I shuffled my sandals against the sidewalk, pressing my lips together.

"I do, too." I could, at least, admit that much. Even though I despised Jett for what she did, I also missed the way things used to be.

XANDER FOUND ME ON THE WAY TO WEAPONRY, SNEAKING UP OUT OF nowhere as usual, causing my heart to trip over itself. He reached for my wrist, twisting it back and forth, and my charm bracelet sparkled in the sunlight.

“Looks good on you,” he said, running his thumb over the little blue stone.

“Oh, that?” I smirked. “A handsome gladiator gave it to me.”

His lips curved. “He must really like you.”

“Oh, he does. A *lot*. I mean, it’s almost overwhelming. The guy would be lost without me—”

“I get the picture.” Xander chuckled. Then he gently squeezed my hand, the humor vanishing from his face. “I would be though.”

“What?”

“Lost without you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, stop.” He had been doing just fine before I came along, and he handled everything thrown at him far better than I did.

“I would.” The way he said it combined with the intensity in his gaze made me almost believe him.

We walked to the training field together, our hands entwined. Once there, I found an available spot on the grass and took a seat. Xander took his

place next to Redtree, getting the weapons ready for today's training session. Students filed around me, spreading out along the grass. I felt the moment Riley arrived, her venomous gaze searing the back of my neck, but I ignored it.

Redtree began his lecture, diving in where we left off in *A History of Warfare*, a textbook I already imprinted and knew from cover to cover. But as he discussed the various swords used during the Roman Empire, my mind wandered, distracted by a strange buzzing.

I tried to shake it off, trying to focus on Redtree. The buzzing grew louder, like a prickly hum in my ears. I fidgeted anxiously, stretching out my hands, then tightening them again. The air was thick with tension, and I wasn't sure why.

Stranger yet, I felt my little bracelet struggling to ward off the sensations. As if it were trying to protect me from a darker force.

I caught Xander's gaze. He watched me, his brows furrowed together. "What's wrong?" he mouthed silently.

I shrugged, no answer to give. Something just felt...off. I glanced around, looking for signs of it in the faces of the other students. They listened quietly to Master Redtree's lecture, nothing out of the ordinary.

*Riley.*

I searched for her, sensing she might be behind this. She was centered between Calypso and Anastasia, but she wasn't paying much attention to the lecture. She tilted her head toward me, that familiar gleam in her eyes, while twisting something in her hand. I squinted, trying to get a better look at what she wound through her fingers. A stone. It was attached to a golden chain around her neck, one I'd never seen her wear before.

As soon as Redtree was done speaking, it was time to partner up and train. Xander, sensing something was up, stopped what he was doing and rushed to my side.

"What's that stone Riley is wearing?" I said, keeping my voice low.

Xander looked, then went very still. “Make up an excuse. Tell Redtree you’re not feeling well, then get out of here.”

Just like the day before, Riley headed in my direction. With every step she took, a red haze encompassed me. She wore a sly smile, the same one she wore when I found her with Connor. The memories came back in sharp flashes. The two of them breaking apart. The guilt on Connor’s face. The fire exploding into flames behind us. The way my fury grew until it was out of control.

Xander pressed his hand against my shoulder, pulling me to the present. “Sheridan, listen to me.” He steered me around. “Get out of here. That stone is magnifying the effects of your curse.”

As soon as he said it, I knew it was true. All of the anger, hate, and bitterness I worked so hard to keep pushed down was brimming at the surface, threatening to spillover.

But the buzz of the past grew louder than Xander’s voice, drowning him out. That night flooded back, a blur of rage, cursing, and violence. Riley and I fought like maniacs, trying our best to draw blood. Our actions spooked Connor enough to run out of there, shouting for help. I hadn’t realized it at the time, but he went to get Dad.

I still remembered the scissors with clarity. They were sitting on Riley’s vanity, the kind that came from a beauty supply store, sharper than most. She swung a chair at me, knocking it into my legs. I made a quick grab for the scissors and plunged them into her shoulder. My breath sharpened when I thought about how badly I wanted to pierce her heart. At the last moment, I shifted up. Just a millisecond within that blind fury that saved her life.

She stopped before me, carrying two swords. “Hello, Sher Bear.” She tossed one of the swords, and it landed at my feet. “Let’s train.”

I blinked, torn between the past and present.

*Focus. Stay focused.*

“Do you ever stop, Riley?” I cut straight to the point. “Now you’re amplifying the thing that’s trying to kill us both?”

She shrugged, unapologetic. “It can only end with death. Hopefully, yours.”

“Is this why you trapped Dad inside the house? To have ample opportunity without him getting in your way?”

“You heard about that, huh?” She chuckled, then shook her head. “No, I spelled that trap for just for fun. He deserves to stay locked inside the cage he created for me.”

“Fine.” I ground my teeth together. “You want your chance. Here it is.” I picked up the sword.

“Finally.” She breathed a sigh of relief, as if she were long ready for this.

“Sheridan, *no*.” Xander’s tone was full of disapproval that I ignored.

We took our places, waiting for the other class members to do the same. Redtree gave the signal, and Riley wasted no time swinging. I wasn’t skilled in fencing, but I knew the basics, and I had a lot of adrenaline pumping to help aid me.

“The swords aren’t spelled,” Xander said from the sidelines, referring to the precautions usually put in place to keep the students from accidentally killing themselves during training sessions. No one out here wore any armor, because the swords prevented killing blows. But I didn’t care. Every cell in my body wanted to fight.

Riley was good. Better than good. She had obviously trained before, saw my every move coming, and managed to block each swing with perfect precision. My only advantage was my anger. I was tired of this. The fighting. The curse. Everything. I put all of my strength into each swing, an endless supply of energy urging me forward.

“Will you feel better once I’m dead?” I screamed. We were gaining a crowd of spectators around us full of curious students, several of them



taking bets.

“Absolutely,” she said. “I’ll even dance on your grave.”

The blade of her sword came around to my left. I ducked, then kicked her in her stomach. Riley flew backward into the ground, her sword sliding off into the grass.

“Looks like no dancing for you.” I held my sword to her throat.

“Do it,” she dared me, weaponless. “End it now, then we can both be free.”

Her words startled me enough to pause. Riley never could stand feeling trapped. She would rather be dead.

A great force slammed into me from the side, and the sword flung from my hand. Xander’s arms caged me in, keeping me locked in place. It took me a few seconds to breathe. Partly because the wind was knocked from my lungs, but mostly, because I was stunned Xander was the cause. Sweat dripped from his face—he’d obviously been fighting the urge to stop me long before he did.

“Why did you do that?” Riley demanded, standing. She dusted herself off, circling around us. Her hazel eyes, so like my own, searched our faces for an explanation. “Why did you stop her?”

“Because we don’t train to kill each other at this school.” Xander tried to play off what was actually happening to him. “The two of you took things too far.”

She pressed her lips together. “No, I don’t think that’s why.”

“Detention,” said a gruff voice from behind. It was Redtree. He loomed over the three of us, his stony face scrunched together in disapproval. “For both of you.”

Riley huffed and walked away. As soon as she was gone, the hold the necklace had on me released. It felt as if I could breathe again, the monster inside of me returning to its deep slumber.

Right away, I knew I'd made a horrific mistake. Riley may not understand exactly what happened with Xander, but she saw enough to know something was up. It didn't make sense for my own boyfriend to stop me when she was the one instigating the fight.

Once the class was over, I tried to apologize. "Xander, I'm—"

"No," he cut me off abruptly. "You don't get to make excuses. I *told* you to leave, but you didn't listen."

I felt *awful*.

If I could dig a grave for myself, I would.

That necklace may have amplified the situation, but I had a choice. I could have chosen not to respond. Instead, I jeopardized everything we worked so hard to prevent. I gave into my own anger.

His blue eyes pierced into me. "Don't you get it? You outed me, Sheridan."

I squared my shoulders back, going into defense mode. "Hey, that's not fair."

"Neither was what you did." He stormed away, ignoring any apologies I tried to make. I hated how he did that—avoided me when he was angry. This time I wasn't letting him get away with it.

So, I marched after him. "Yes, I screwed up, but you can't put *all* the blame on me."

He swung around, tossing his shield aside. "I wasn't the one fighting your sister."

"No, you just protected her."

He blinked, obviously surprised I would go there. "I couldn't—"

"Help it?" I finished for him, crossing my arms over my chest. "Sounds awfully familiar."

He let out a long, slow breath. "Our situations are not the same."

"No, they're not. I didn't choose to be cursed, but you *chose* to take that oath with Selena. Now that you're facing the consequences, here you are,

shifting the blame on me.” Even as the words spewed from my mouth, I hated myself for saying them. I knew he made that oath to escape the Underworld. I knew he did it to save his own life. But I said them anyway.

Xander’s jaw ticked as he took a step toward me. “You’re forgetting one thing, damsel.” I didn’t like the derision in his tone.

“What’s that?”

“I *wanted* to carry out the terms of that oath, until I met you. The only reason I’m not doing everything Selena asked of me, is for you.”

I raised my brows, so stunned I had to take a breath. “Are you saying, if not for me, you would happily protect Riley?”

“Selena helped me escape the Underworld. Yes, I would’ve kept my end of our bargain.”

I swallowed.

It would have been less hurtful if he’d slapped me across the face. Somehow, even though I was dying inside, I kept my head held high. “Then maybe you should.”

With that said, I walked away. I needed to get off this field and away from both him and Riley before I said or did anything else I would end up regretting.

“Sheridan, wait,” Xander sighed behind me.

But there was nothing left to say. We had both said more than enough.

THE DAY THAT STARTED OFF SO PERFECTLY KEPT GETTING WORSE. Grandpa sent a note to my next class that instructed me to report to his office for detention. *Don't be late*, it read. Because he knew me well enough to know I would drag my feet.

I chewed the side of my cheek, wondering what Dad was thinking. Only his first day at Arcadia, and Riley and I were at each other's throats again. After the last incident, he sent me away to put some space between us. This time, I may not be so lucky.

When dinnertime came, I hesitated at the door to Grandpa's office. This felt an awful lot like déjà vu. The only other time I'd been here was for my previous detention, when Grandpa interrogated Xander. Now it was my turn.

I wasn't sure how to explain my fight with Riley when he explicitly told me to stay away from her. I closed my eyes and breathed out through my nose. I would've rather taken my detention in a snake pit.

My brows raised at the sound of Riley's voice, followed by Dad's. Oh, this should be interesting. The family reunion from hell. But hey, at least that meant Grandpa wouldn't be laser focused on me. My sister had a reckoning coming her way too. Before going in, I pressed my ear to the door.

“You didn’t think you’d have to suffer any consequences?” Dad shouted. “You made me a prisoner in my own home!”

“Now you know how I felt,” she replied, without an ounce of regret. Typical Riley response. Always eye for an eye with her.

“Let me go!” Riley screamed suddenly, and I blinked, wondering what was going on in there.

Dad’s voice was more forceful than usual. “Sit down, Riley.”

“Or what?”

“Or I will withdraw you from this school as soon as I leave this room. Now SIT DOWN.”

I cracked the door open in time to catch Riley throw herself into the nearest chair, crossing her arms over her chest dramatically. “Fine, let’s get this over with. Where the hell is Sheridan?”

I cleared my throat and shut the door behind me.

My gaze went straight to Dad. I blinked, doing a double take. He usually looked like a tidy, younger replica of Grandpa, always clean shaven, in pressed clothes and shiny loafers. But tonight, he looked rough, barely resembling the father I knew. In the few months I’d been away, he had aged years. His reddish blonde hair was ruffled, he sported a full beard, and the lines in his face were more pronounced. The poor guy looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks.

“Sheridan.” His arms came around me at once. I breathed in his cologne, feeling a lump swell in the back of my throat. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed him.

Riley snorted. “And just like that, she’s back to the perfect angel again.”

Dad looked pointedly at me. “You were supposed to keep your distance.”

“I know.” I pressed my lips together; there was no point in making excuses. “I’m sorry.”

He took my face in his hands and sighed. “I’m just glad to find you both *alive*.”

Ah, the emotion in his voice was killing me. He was too soft to play the bad cop. He loved us too much.

Grandpa, on the other hand, had no problem taking that role. “You can have a seat too, Sheridan. Over there, across from your sister.”

Dad patted my arm. “We’ll catch up later. For now, let’s deal with the situation at hand.”

I nodded. Without a word, I dropped myself into the nearest chair.

Grandpa hovered over Riley, his expression deadly serious. He looked every bit the experienced military veteran, ready to go to battle. “Now, then.” He leaned down to her eye level. “Your father had his turn. Now, it’s mine. All I want is to ask one simple question—is it genuinely your goal to murder your sister?”

“She tried to kill me first,” Riley answered simply.

“That’s an excuse, not an answer. The question is, do you want your sister dead?”

My whole body tensed up, and I curled my fingers around the arms of my chair. I wasn’t sure why I cared to hear this; I already knew what her answer would be. From the moment Riley arrived at Arcadia, she made her intentions abundantly clear, playing a deadly game of cat and mouse.

“Answer me, girl.”

“Yes.” She swallowed. “I want her dead.”

We all stayed quiet, waiting for what he would do next.

Grandpa simply nodded. “Okay, then.”

He walked around his desk, reached into the top left drawer, and pulled out a small pistol. “Here’s your chance.” He spun the cylinder around to show her it was fully loaded with bullets before clicking it shut. Circling around the desk, he tossed the gun into Riley’s lap. “Kill her.”

I immediately stood. Dad shuffled around the desk, and we both rushed to speak at the same time.

“Grandpa, you can’t—”

“Have you lost your mind?” Dad’s eyes bulged, making it obvious he didn’t have prior knowledge to this insane plan.

“What? I’m letting the girl carry out her vengeance.” Grandpa leaned against the side of his desk, his arms crossed over his chest, as if he didn’t just hand my murderous sister a deadly weapon.

“You are playing with fire, Pa!” Dad shouted, his face red and blotchy. “You know the seriousness of their situation.”

Grandpa steered him back, guiding him to move out of the way. “Stay over there, Daniel. This might get messy.”

I shifted my gaze between Grandpa and my sister, unable to believe what was happening.

Then it hit me.

Grandpa was forcing Riley to face her demons head-on, because he didn’t think she had the guts to actually go through with it. She *said* she wanted me dead, and she probably meant it. Or, at least, she believed she meant it. If she couldn’t pull the trigger, she would have to face the fact that it wasn’t what she truly wanted. Then we could all get down to the business of searching for a cure. Finally.

Good grief, if his plan wasn’t so crazy, it would be brilliant.

Riley fumbled with the gun for a few seconds, stunned, looking unsure of how to handle it. I stood still as she aimed it at me.

“Get on with it, girl,” Grandpa said, his tone impatient.

Dad let out a long breath, his forehead creased with worry. “This is madness,” he said, shaking his head. “Absolute madness.”

Grandpa ignored him, focusing on Riley instead. “Everyone is tired of dealing with this damnable curse. End it now, so all of our lives can return to normal. I haven’t slept in the last seventeen years and neither has your

father. The two of us have spent every spare moment searching for a cure. All of that work, the sleepless nights, the worrying—it will be for nothing, but that’s fine. Kill her. Be done with it. Put us all out of our misery.”

Grandpa was ramping up the reverse psychology. I had to hand it to the guy. He knew how to take risks. I just hoped he was right about this one.

“I know what you’re doing,” Riley snapped, visibly trembling. “You don’t think I’ll do it.”

She had always been smarter than people assumed. I wasn’t surprised she was onto him.

Grandpa shrugged. “Prove me wrong. You’re the one holding a loaded gun. Hell, kill us all. Plenty of bullets to spare.”

Behind us, Dad groaned, running a hand over his weary face. “This is going too far, Pa.”

“Keep quiet, Daniel. We’re at the end of a road here. It’s time we all face that.”

Riley tightened her grip on the gun, looping her finger around the trigger. She was shaking so bad that if she did shoot, I wasn’t all that sure she would make her intended target. Perhaps a bullet to the leg, arm, or a graze on my side. I swallowed and held my breath, afraid this might not end the way Grandpa expected.

There was too much anger in Riley’s weighted gaze. Too much resentment. The drumming of my heartbeat pounded in my ears, louder than anything else. At any moment, I was sure I would pass out from the lack of oxygen.

Several tense seconds ticked by. I didn’t move a muscle. I just stared at my sister, wondering if these were my last moments. If I was going to die at her hands, I wanted to look her in the eyes while she did it.

She lowered the gun. “Not like this,” she said through gritted teeth. “She won’t suffer enough.”

I let out a long breath. *Thank God.*



“Oh, we’re making excuses now?” Grandpa snorted derisively. “I have a full supply of weapons, both magical and nonmagical at your disposal. We can tie Sheridan down and you can spend the rest of the evening torturing her.”

I flicked my gaze toward Grandpa, scowling. He had *better* be calling her bluff.

Riley slammed the gun down on the desk beside him. “Physical torture is nothing,” she said, the frustration palpable in her voice. “I want her to experience total devastation.”

Grandpa got right up in her face. “Be more specific, girl. Exactly what are you after?”

“I don’t know.” Riley held up her hands.

“Your opportunity has been handed to you on a golden platter!” he said, refusing to let her back down. “What the hell do you want?”

Her eyes darted back and forth wildly, the frustration mounting. “I don’t know!” she insisted, shouting now. “I just...I want to hurt her as much as possible! Just as much as me.”

I pressed my lips together, those words absorbing into my soul. *Just as much as me*. Somewhere along the way, I’d hurt Riley, and not just by stabbing her with those scissors.

“Finally, something I can believe,” Grandpa whispered. He took a step forward, his gaze moving over both of us. “The two of you have done awful, horrible things to each other.” His voice was softer now, no longer egging Riley on. “But that doesn’t mean you’re without hope.”

“We’re cursed, old man. That’s pretty much what it means.” She flung herself back into her chair, letting out a defeated sigh. Her hazel eyes were calmer, her breath evening out.

“Curses can be undone.” Dad moved toward her. “We *will* figure this out, Riley.”

“Delusional idiot.” She sniffed. “The two of you have been trying to figure it out our entire lives. What makes you think we’re any closer?”

At that point, I’d had enough. “At least *they* tried. You’ve only known about the curse for a few weeks and you’re already giving up.”

“A few weeks?” Riley looked pointedly at Dad. “I take it you didn’t tell her.”

Oh, no.

No more secrets.

But Dad’s guilty expression confirmed he was hiding something. *Great.*

“Tell me what?” He didn’t answer right away, so I continued to stare him down. “Come on, Dad. It’s time to get every piece of dirty laundry out in the open.”

He cleared his throat. “She’s known for two years.”

“*Two years?*”

“Selena sent her a letter. I wasn’t aware of it until only recently.”

Selena—Riley’s mother.

“I did my best to stay away from you,” Riley said, her voice thick with bitterness. “I made other friends, kept myself involved with school activities, all while trying to research curses in my spare time. Then Dad kept me confined to the house and ruined all the progress I’d made.”

My jaw dropped a little.

I believed we had grown apart, that my sister wanted nothing to do with me. But she kept her distance on purpose—to protect us both.

“I grounded you because you were getting out of control,” Dad said, shaking his head. “You make it sound like there was no crime behind the punishment.”

Riley groaned. “Did you ever consider that keeping all of those secrets in the human world might take its toll?”

“Okay fine, all of that makes sense.” I paced across the office. “But why Connor?”

She stared at me for several long seconds, making me wonder if she would give me an answer. Her eyes tightened at the corners. “I was sick of all of it. The curse, being a mage being in a nonmagical world, knowing our time was getting closer, the pressure to stop it, and I just...I looked at you and you were so *happy*. There I was, in that dark place, and I hated you for your ability to walk in the sun, without a care in the world. So, jealousy, I guess. I was tired of running. As soon as I stopped to catch my breath, the curse caught up to me.”

Hold up. *She* was jealous of *me*?

Almost impossible to believe.

“Where do we go from here?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged, sighing in a defeated tone. “But I know one thing—using that gun is the easy way out.”

When I looked at her, I could see the weariness she mentioned. There used to be a spark in her gaze I hadn’t seen in a long time. She used to be effortlessly happy. But running from the monster inside was a nonstop job, one I was getting firsthand familiarity with.

I cleared my throat. “Well, I might have something. Grandpa doesn’t like it, but I think it’s a good option.”

“On Zeus’s grave, Sheridan. If you bring up Persephone’s Cure—”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I laid on the sarcasm pretty thick. “Did you have any *other* ideas?”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“Do you know what else is dangerous? The two of us trying to kill each other every chance we get.”

“We will separate the two of you again until we can come up with something better. Send Riley back to Davidson.”

“No.” Riley shook her head emphatically. “I don’t want to go back to the human world. This is where I belong.”

“Separation won’t do any good anyway,” I pointed out. “When the effects of the curse grow stronger, all Riley has to do is conjure another monster and send it my way.”

Riley nodded, in total agreement for a change. “That sounds like something I would do.”

Dad crossed his arms over his chest. “No,” he finally said. “Your grandfather’s right. It’s too dangerous.”

My shoulders drooped. This was so unfair.

The three of us spent the rest of the night arguing, only to reach an inevitable stalemate. Riley remained quiet in her chair, acting as if she didn’t care either way. Her only concern was for herself, and that she stayed at Arcadia. It bothered me. I wished she would’ve fought harder, but I was the only one who kept pushing to go to the Underworld. In the end, Grandpa cut off my arguments. He sent Dad to walk me back to my dorm, while he escorted Riley. They didn’t trust the two of us alone together. I found that ironic considering not long ago Grandpa put a loaded gun in my sister’s hands. But, no. The Underworld was somehow more dangerous.

Good grief, what logic.



For a while, Dad and I walked in silence. Now that it was just us, I had so much to say, but I didn’t know where to begin. Instead, I just watched him, trying to imagine him as a student, walking these same grounds. It wasn’t hard to do. As rough as he looked, he was still handsome, and he looked ten years younger than he was.

“Everything will be okay, Sher Bear.” For once, it was nice to hear that nickname without the snide tone attached.

“How do you know?”

“Because we’re all in this fight together.”

It was a nice thought, but not entirely true. “Riley seemed bored of it.”

“To be fair, she’s been aware of the curse a lot longer than you.”

I glanced around, making sure the connecting sidewalks and pathways were empty. It was time for us to have the conversation he’d been avoiding.

*Here goes nothing.* “Dad?” I waited for him to look up. “What happened between you and my mother?”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “That’s uh, a heavy topic.”

“You lied to me.”

His eyes tightened at the corners. “Only to protect you.”

“I deserve to know the truth, and to hear your side of it.”

He looked up at the crescent moon for several long seconds, then back at me. “Yes, you do.”

I swallowed, sensing he was finally ready to be open and honest. “Did Grandpa tell you I met Petra?”

He nodded.

“I was blindsided, Dad. Do you know how unfair it was, to hear it from her?”

“I’m not sure how credible her side of the story was.”

I blinked. “It’s better than what you gave me—nothing!”

“Calm down, Sheridan. Here, have a seat.” We reached the front steps to House Aphrodite, empty for the moment. I plopped down on one of the stone steps, and he sat beside me.

“How could you do it, Dad?” Already, tears rose. I loved him, but I was so, *so* angry with him, and I couldn’t keep it locked inside anymore. “How could you impregnate two women at the same time? I never took you for a manwhore—”

“Watch your tone, Sheridan. Do you want this story or not?”

I breathed out through my nose. “Let’s hear it then.”

“I loved your mother.”

I blinked again, not expecting that. That's not what Xander told me. That's not even what Petra told me.

"We were best friends from the day we met. Inseparable. She was my stars, my moon, my everything...I loved that woman more deeply than I've ever loved anyone, and I believed we'd be together forever."

"Wait a second." I wiped at my eyes, straightening. "Then why did you leave her for Selena?"

"It was complicated, Sher."

"Patronizing, much?" I narrowed my eyes. "Riley and I almost killed each other over a boy. I understand that relationships are complicated."

At the mention of that godawful night, his face went all twisty. "God, don't remind me. You girls put me through hell and back—"

"My *point* is," I frowned, realizing we were getting off topic fast. "I'm pretty sure I can keep up."

He let out a long, heavy sigh. "I know you can. It's just hard to talk about." He looked up at the sky again, drifting away for several moments. The next time he spoke, I felt the pain in his voice. "We had a fight, a big one. It ended with both of us screaming and saying things we didn't mean. The thing is, Petra and I were both too stubborn for our own good. We were prideful Ares descendants; apologies and expressing emotions were like a foreign language to us. After we broke up, I would've done *anything* to stop thinking about her..."

He looked down at his hands in his lap, and I patiently waited for him to continue. It was obvious he didn't want to talk about this, but he was doing it for me.

"My days were spent training, and my nights were spent forgetting. I did everything I could to forget—drinking, partying, and yes, I suppose I did my share of manwhoring." He briefly glanced at me. "You see, Selena was never supposed to be permanent."

First of all, *ew*.

Hearing about my dad's promiscuous history weirded me out on so many levels. It was not in character with the straight-laced guy I'd known my entire life.

Second of all, his story did *not* line up with the one I heard.

"So...you didn't fall madly in love with Selena?" I said, trying to get a clear picture of what happened.

"What?" He vehemently shook his head. "Don't get me wrong, she was—and probably still is—a lovely person, but Petra always had my heart."

I let that sink in for a few moments, realizing Xander told me the story backward. Guess that was bound to happen when love triangles went through gossip mills.

"But..." I thought back to the night Grandpa hooked Xander to the ollidipher, trying to remember everything he said. "Selena is alive and well, working as a psychic in the Hollowed Castle. Grandpa said when you found out, it would destroy you."

"Yes, that *was* hard to hear. But not because I was in love with her. Because I assumed, like everyone else, that she was dead. And because I left them both in the Underworld, trapped, and I never once tried to help either of them."

"Explain."

"I'm getting there. Like I said before, Selena was supposed to be a one-night stand."

I scrunched my face together. "Yep, I'm ready to move on from that."

"Then she told me she was pregnant. You want to talk about being blindsided? That one hit me hard." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I wanted to do the right thing. So, I gave her my grandmother's ring. We planned to marry after graduation. I had no idea Petra was also pregnant."

"But that would mean..." The wheels turned over in my mind. "Wait—I'm the *older* sister?"

He nodded, smiling for a moment. “Only by a month or two at most. As a toddler, Riley started speaking before you did, so I decided she would be the eldest. I told everyone your birthdays were a year apart to keep our backstory believable.”

All my life, I’d been looking up to Riley, believing she was the older, wiser sibling. I couldn’t wait to throw that back in her face.

“So, you got two women pregnant at the same time,” I said, trying to put all the pieces together for once and for all. “But if you loved Petra, why did you choose Selena?”

“Petra came to speak to me, shortly after I proposed to Selena. In retrospect, I believe she came to tell me about her pregnancy, but I couldn’t bear looking at her. She was everything I wanted, and in my mind, everything I couldn’t have. Not if I wanted to put my unborn child first. So, I shut the door in her face.” He winced, shame washing over him. “If I had given her the chance to speak...if I had known about you...I would have done things differently. But I didn’t know, and I didn’t find out until you were placed on my doorstep with that damnable stone tablet.”

What Petra told me in the Underworld suddenly came back, her voice filling my mind.

*There I was—humiliated and pregnant. My mother was so angry, she disowned me. Since Daniel was with Selena, I had nowhere to go. Thomas was my only option. I fled to the Underworld and begged him to let me stay.*

Maybe I was quick to judge Petra. The man she loved shunned her, her mother did the same, and then her own father trapped her in a world full of monsters. She literally had no one but me, and I was kidnapped, cursed, and sent to live with my father.

I hated that Petra was a hollow. I hated that she had tortured and killed people, but I had to admit—it was no wonder she became who she was. I would’ve become the Darth Vader of the Underworld if I experienced half of what she had gone through.



“Why *did* you leave them in the Underworld?” I said, trying to understand Dad’s side of it.

He let out a shaky breath. “I’m not proud of this part, but I want to be completely transparent.”

I nodded, bracing myself.

“Like everyone else, I believed the rumors. I assumed it was Petra who cursed you, and that she kidnapped and murdered Selena out of spite.”

I swallowed. Just like me, he believed the worst of her.

“The thing is,” he continued explaining, “she was known to go off the rails when she was angry. At the time, I didn’t know what else to think. Now, I’ve had years to go over it in my mind. Yes, she had a temper. And yes, she beat the hell out of anyone who got in her way, but to murder someone?” He ran his hands over his face, slowly shaking his head. “I *know* Petra could never do what people said she did. Deep down, she had a kind heart, and she *loved* animals. I once watched her heal a bird with a broken wing with magic. She never would have killed anyone, much less curse her own child.”

He was right on one of those counts, but the Petra I knew had no problem killing nowadays.

Dad shook himself, then continued on. “But I was young and foolish. Since I was in pain, I wanted to believe the worst of her. You and your sister became all that mattered, and that I had to be strong for the two of you. I made the choice to leave Mythos, hoping that by doing so, I could keep you safe for as long as possible.”

Well, there it was.

The story I had been waiting for, and I don’t know if I felt any better now that I finally heard it.

No one had come out a winner. Least of all, Riley and me.

And if I felt bad, I couldn’t imagine the guilt *Dad* felt. I don’t think he could have helped either of our moms escape, but I knew him well enough

to know he wished he would have tried. He wasn't the kind to turn his back on someone who needed him.

"What did Petra say when you met her?" His hands muffled his voice. "Does she hate me?"

I gently touched Dad's arm. "She's probably not the person you remember."

He let his hands fall away to look at me, then nodded. "Seventeen years in the Underworld would change anyone."

I thought of the way Petra grieved over the dead dragon though, and I wondered if traces of her old self remained.

"It's your turn." His tone took on a serious edge. "Tell me everything that happened when you met her."

I knew it was best to be honest, even if it hurt him to hear the painful details. I told him Petra pledged herself as a hollow, that she had served the council for years by torturing prisoners with her mind control at the Hollowed Castle. I also told him she had mistakenly assumed she kidnapped Riley, and most importantly, that she would have killed me if I *had* been Riley.

The news didn't bother him as much as I expected. He just stroked his chin, lost in thought. "I don't know that she would have gone through with it."

"It was premeditated, Dad. And she's a trained killer. She definitely would have gone through with it."

I don't know why, but I didn't reveal that she sent me the parchwyn, or that she agreed not to kill Riley for now. Whoever Petra Drakos was, she was no longer the person he once loved. I didn't want to give him false hope.

"That may be the case, and if it is, I'm partly to blame."

"How so?"

“Because I left her there,” he said simply. “Along with figuring out how to stop the curse, I must find a way to free her—to free them both.”

“Sounds impossible,” I sighed.

He shrugged one shoulder. “Impossible is a circumstance I’ve been dealing with for years.” Hope sparked in his hazel eyes. “It’s time we changed that.”

THAT NIGHT, I DREAMT OF THE CURSE BREAKER. I WAS BACK ON HIS wooden floor, surrounded by candles. Some of them burned orange, some black. He chanted loudly, his voice moving from every direction. The candle flames grew into towering waves of fire, hovering over me. Sweat dripped from my skin and I closed my eyes to prepare for my inevitable death.

*Sheridan.*

I awoke to someone shaking me. It instantly brought me back to the night Jett had me kidnapped by her creature goons, and I screamed.

A hand came over my mouth. “Sheridan, it’s me.” I blinked several times as Xander’s face took shape in the dark. After the way we left things on the training field, I wanted a clear head before I talked to him again. And I definitely didn’t want to have this conversation in my *bed*. If anyone caught us, we would be in all kinds of trouble.

He lifted his hand, and I immediately started questioning him. “Why are you—”

Xander’s eyes darted to Ione, who was asleep across the room. Ione was a deep sleeper though, and she usually had several glasses of wine in her system. She wouldn’t wake up.

“I’m sorr—”

“I want to apologize—”

Realizing what we were doing, we stopped. Xander breathed out through his nose, his mouth curving up on one side.

The awful things I said to him hadn't left my mind. I realized he only made the oath with Selena because he was trying to escape imprisonment, and that's about as forced as it got. I needed him to know I understood that. “I didn't mean it,” I whispered, going first. “The things I said—”

He cut me off again, pressing a finger over my lips. “You were right though. I had a choice and you didn't.”

“They held you captive and tortured you,” I said with a shaky breath. “I would have agreed to anything to escape, too. That's not much of a choice.”

He reached for my hand and gently squeezed. “I didn't mean the things I said either. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“I know.” I groaned, still ashamed for how badly I screwed things up. “I should've left when you told me to leave.”

He shook his head. “None of it was your fault.” He lightly traced the bracelet he'd given me. “The protection stone was no match for your sister's amulet. I wish I could give you something better.”

“Don't say that.” I held the little charm against my heart. “I could feel it warning me.”

“It failed to keep you safe.”

“I'm fine, Xander. Look at me.”

We both went quiet for several long seconds, simply taking in each other's presence. His magic settled my frantic nerves, the fresh scent transporting me away from that awful dream and into a peaceful, warm place.

Xander leaned down and rested his head next to mine, slowly breathing out. “I don't want to keep messing this up. You're too important.” His words seemed to carry more meaning than I understood. “No matter what happens, you should know that.”

I pulled back, raising a brow. “What’s going to happen?”

“Nothing.” He raised himself up off the bed and carefully tucked my hair behind my ear. “I just wanted you to know. You mean everything to me, Sheridan.” He leaned down, brushing his lips against mine for the briefest of moments. Little sparks of heat tickled my lips, and I wanted to pull him back to make the feeling last longer.

But light flooded the hallway outside my door. Lately, the admins had been doing bed checks, magical ones, that would give away Xander’s presence. “I should go,” he whispered, glancing toward the balcony.

I swallowed, noticing the way his mouth pulled into a frown. There was more going on inside his head than he was telling me. He went to leave, but I caught his arm. “Wait.”

He looked at me expectantly.

“You do, too...” I said, my sentence drifting off. *Mean everything to me.*

The words got stuck in my throat, sort of difficult to say. But Xander knew what I meant. He reached behind my head and pulled me close again. Butterflies soared as he kissed me with a devastating intensity that made me want to cry and scream at the same time.

Before I could pull myself together, he slipped back out through the balcony, leaving me reeling from that kiss. I touched my lips for a second, wondering at the emotion I’d felt behind it. It was almost like...like he thought he wouldn’t get another chance.

I shook my head, positive I was crazy. Xander wasn’t going anywhere, and if he was, he would tell me. This was simply my abandonment issues showing up in full force.

But then, I kept thinking about the way he said, “*No matter what happens.*”

Those words rung in my ear, chilling me to the bone. He said it like he knew something *would*.

SHERIDAN,

*I gathered more information about Persephone's Cure through a reliable source. An intriguing solution, one that offers promise! As it so happens, Selena revealed you and your sister would come to the Underworld. I didn't fully understand it at the time, but her predictions are famous for their accuracy. If Selena already saw it coming to pass, then it is impossible to prevent. As much as I fear your coming here, my best course of action is to prepare for your arrival. I can't stress this enough—keep it a secret. Thomas Vane can never know.*

*I will begin searching for suitable accommodations, somewhere you can remain hidden. When you are ready, just say the word.*

*-Your Mom*

It took me several seconds to remember to breathe.

Selena saw us coming there.

I didn't even think it was a reality, especially after last night. Both Grandpa and Dad shut the idea down almost as soon as I brought it up. But if she saw us, that changed everything. It meant it *had* to happen. It meant I couldn't give up trying to convince them.

I glanced once at Petra's signature again.

*Your Mom.*

Like she wanted to remind me. But I didn't need reminding. I thought about who she was and what that meant daily. Unsure of how to reply, I closed the parchwyn and slipped it back into the space beneath my bed, where I'd been hiding it.

Whenever the journey to the Underworld became possible, it was nice to know I had help waiting. I doubt I could survive without it.

"Sheridan, don't forget about Lovers Ball tonight."

I blinked and looked up at Ione. She was about to walk out the door, the strap of her bag slung over her shoulder.

Lovers Ball was an annual Aphrodite event to hand out awards to our mastery classmates and celebrate their impending journey into the workforce. But really, it was just another excuse for Aphrodite students to throw a party. This one just happened to be bigger and grander than the rest.

"I'll be there," I said, nodding.

I had *totally* forgotten, but I tried not to show it. She already made me feel bad about my preference for House Ares. No need for her to know how little focus I'd been giving Aphrodite lately, especially after the way she came to my rescue with the geniox rumor. When she figured out I didn't have a dress, she would be livid.

She tilted her head to the side, seeing right through me. "I got you a dress last week."

I let out a breath of relief. "Thanks, Ione."

"Be back before dinner," she ordered. "I'll do your hair and makeup. God knows what will happen if you're left to your own devices."

I gave her a little salute and she walked out the door.

I walked swiftly to my first class of the day—Basic Magic Principles—and after I got there and sat down, I nearly groaned out loud when Jett sat next to me. I wondered why she bothered.



“Hey, Thorny,” she said cheerfully, just as she had been doing for the last several days. “How are you?”

“Still alive,” I muttered sarcastically. “Unless you plan on selling my soul for more magic.”

She snorted. “Cute.”

Those kinds of comments used to make her feel bad enough to leave me alone, but the sting in them had stopped working. So, I scooted my chair as far as I could away from her, then pulled out my notebook and set it on the table in front of me.

“We have a lab today,” Jett said, and I winced. One more thing I’d forgotten about—the rune reading. Professor Ambrosia was big on teaching us all forms of ancient divination.

She cleared her throat. “The wishbone crossed with the gnarly one means...” She looked down at the textbook. “Clarity?”

“Good enough. Is it my turn?”

Jett shoved the book away. “Forget this poppy-cock. I’ve got actual spirits whispering in my ear, Thorny. Let me give you a *real* reading.”

“No, thanks.” I rolled my eyes. The last thing I wanted was for her to use the same magic she traded my life for to give me a reading.

“Your grandmother appeared to me last night.”

I blinked, stunned, but I didn’t let it show. “That’s nice.”

“She said when you were young, she used to braid flowers into your hair and call you her little sunshine.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. I didn’t have many memories of my grandmother, but I vividly remember her calling me that, and I have pictures of me in braids with flowers.

“A few more of your ancestors were with her, most of whom you don’t know. They say you’re important to Mythos.”

I shrugged her words off, struggling to look unaffected. “Awesome.”

“More important than you give yourself credit for,” she added, raising her brows as if she were impressed. “In fact, they say the separation ends with you.”

“Separation?” I tried to sound uninterested, but even I could detect the piqued curiosity in my voice.

“Of magic.”

Now *that* got my attention.

I was afraid to ask any more questions, but I couldn’t help it at this point. “What does that mean?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know exactly...just that you mark the beginning of blended magic. Because of you, other mages will make the shift.”

I swallowed. Blended magic? That didn’t sound like a bad thing, but in Mythos, it wasn’t really done. This, like everything else Jett had ever said, proved that she was full of smoke and mirrors.

I picked up the pile of bones, gathering them back into the bowl. I handed it to her. “Good to know. Your turn to throw.”

Jett let out a long sigh. “Don’t you care, Thorny?”

“Sure I care—about getting a good grade on this lab. Now throw.”

She frowned but let the subject of my ancestors and blended magic drop for the time being. She took the bowl in her hands, swished it around, then tossed its insides out onto the mat.

I read vague descriptions aloud from the book about what each bone represented. Other than that, we didn’t speak again.

But it didn’t stop me from thinking about what she said. I thought of my grandmother, remembering the way she used to kiss the top of my head. *My little sunshine*, she’d say. *You are so special. So full of light.*

My eyes grew watery. I was only five or six at the time of her death, and I don’t know why it bothered me now.

I shook away the feeling and told myself to let it go. This was just Jett, trying to get to me by playing on my emotions. I refused to let her this time.

WHEN XANDER DIDN'T SHOW UP TO ANY OF OUR USUAL PLACES, I began to feel a little more worried about the night before. I thought I'd find him in Weaponry, and that everything would be fine, but he wasn't there either. With each passing hour, I became more nervous.

I could feel it in my bones—something shifted in him last night.

In my Flight Equestrianism class, the professor made us clean stable stalls and brush the horses down. I didn't mind though. Just being around them had a calming effect. I threw myself into the labor in an attempt to forget everything else.

I was brushing down Leis, a mare with a velvety brown coat that gleamed like chocolate, when I heard footsteps approach. The stall door opened and closed, and Riley stepped inside.

I flinched at her sudden presence. "You're not in this class."

"Nor would I ever be. Just the idea of flying horses..." She shivered. She had always been afraid of heights.

"Then why are you here?"

"To talk."

I was immediately suspicious. If there was one thing I'd learned about this new Riley, it was that she wasn't the talking sort. The conniving sort, yes, but not talkative. "About what?"

“Persephone’s Cure.”

“You certainly didn’t have much to say about it last night.” My words bit with resentment as I remembered how hard I fought to get Dad and Grandpa to consider it while Riley sat there in silence.

“Never reveal all of your cards, Sheridan. That’s my number one rule.”

“Oh, believe me. I am well aware of your card tricks.”

Her hazel eyes glinted. “Fighting with Dad and the old man is useless. Think about it. Dad already feels guilty because our mothers are both trapped in the Underworld. He will never, ever, not in a million years, agree to let us face the same fate.”

This seemed like a pointless conversation. “Then what do you suggest?”

“That we go anyway,” she said simply. “Without telling them.”

Not tell them?

The idea never even occurred to me.

Riley laughed at my stunned reaction. “Always the good daughter, perfect Sheridan. The thought of disobeying Dad must truly rattle your brain.”

I scowled. “Stop saying that.” Had she forgotten that I stabbed her with a pair of scissors?

“My point is, there is no need to argue when we can just take what we want for ourselves. We don’t need permission.”

I swallowed, thinking of Petra’s message. All the stones were falling into place. “You’re right.”

“Of course, I am.”

I stared at her, dazedly. “I should have realized it would come to this. It’s already been seen.”

Riley crooked a brow. “Meaning?”

I debated for several moments, wondering if I could trust her. Then I nearly laughed at the thought. Absolutely, no. When it came to trusting Riley, the answer was always no. I was pretty sure I’d have to keep my

guard up for the rest of my life. But that still left me in the position of needing her cooperation. I didn't have to trust her, but I needed to work with her.

So, I revealed that Petra and I had been communicating. I told her about Selena's premonition. After I finished, Riley let out a shaky breath and leaned back against the stall door. Even she hadn't expected it to work out so perfectly. "That settles it. We're going to the Underworld."

"When?"

She gave me a look that made me think the answer was obvious. "At the start of fall. That's when Persephone went."

Fall. She was right, of course. If we were going to do this, really do this, we needed to mimic Persephone. Fall was symbolic of death. And spring, rebirth. We would give six months in exchange for the rest of our lives.

"Talk to your mom. Tell her to make the arrangements."

I nodded. "I will."

"Until then, we tell no one. We go on as if everything is normal."

"You mean, we go on torturing each other?"

She grinned. "Exactly."

IONE PACED ACROSS OUR SMALL DORMITORY, HOLDING A PIECE OF paper, her cheeks bright red. “How *could* he,” she said, seething. Preoccupied by whatever the paper said, she hardly even noticed that I walked in. But when she did—she furiously waved it at me. “You—did you know about this?”

I shut the door and pressed my back against it, afraid to find out.

Her gaze combed over me. “I can see by how quickly you’ve gone pale, you can guess.”

“Is it from Xander?” I hadn’t seen him all day. Anywhere.

She nodded. “My wretched, soulless brother left me a goddamned *note* to say he’s leaving me alone at Arcadia. No goodbye, no explanations, just this—” She crumpled the paper between her palms, threw it on the floor, then she stomped on it. “*That’s* what I think of your note, Xander!”

I stood there dumbly, shock turning my body numb. This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be real.

After several more stomps, Ione suddenly looked up. “He really didn’t tell you anything about this?”

I shook my head, my messenger bag sliding off my arm to the floor. “He didn’t even leave me a note.”

She scowled at the crumpled, shredded paper. “It didn’t say much,” she said, her tone full of disgust. “Just that he’s sorry and he has to go. He doesn’t mention to where or when he’ll be back.”

“Has he already left?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. This only came about fifteen minutes before you arrived.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “Last time we spoke, he acted strange,” I admitted. “But he never told me he wanted to leave Arcadia.”

“Did anything happen before that?” she pressed. “That would make him do something this desperate?”

Like the way I outed him to Riley?—I winced. God, I hoped that wasn’t the reason.

Then it occurred to me. The *Hollowed Guard*.

Slowly, I walked to my bed, sitting on the edge. “A few nights ago, we encountered three swordsmen. He told me they were members of the Hollowed Guard and,” I swallowed, “he suspected your father sent them.”

Ione lowered herself into the chair behind her vanity. “On Zeus’s grave,” she breathed, staring into space.

“What does it mean?”

She looked up at me and frowned. “I...I’m not sure.”

But I didn’t believe her. She suspected *something*.

She stood and dusted the skirt of her gown. “No matter. We have other things that demand our attention.”

“Ione...I don’t think I can go to the ball.” My stomach twisted painfully. Every cell in my body felt as if it were collapsing.

“Look, I’m just as upset as you are, Sher. But tonight is too important. Let’s get through it and worry about this later, okay?” She looked at me expectantly, and I could see that she was counting on me.

I nodded. “Okay.”



TWO HOURS LATER, WE ARRIVED AT ARCADIA'S BALLROOM. IONE HAD gone all out on my gown; and she'd chosen my favorite color—silver. It looked like something out of a fairytale with its tiered skirt made of a soft, wispy material. If I didn't feel so awful, I would have felt like a princess floating on a cloud.

The ballroom was dripping with crystals and sparkle lights. Thousands of roses linked together as a backdrop on the stage where the graduates collected their awards. The ceiling glittered with giant chandeliers and intricate murals. Everything was so pretty and vibrant, a stark contrast to my own mood.

Every few minutes, they announced an award. As house leader, Peter did most of the presenting. I carefully studied the way Ione watched him. She kept a dead expression, but I saw a glimpse of emotion flash in her eyes. It only took a split second, but it was there. Pain. I knew that feeling all too well—heartbreak was an old friend of mine. I still wondered what happened between the two of them, but I didn't bring it up again. Whatever was going on, Ione was determined to keep it private and I tried to respect that.

Several of Ione's friends bombarded us right away. We didn't mention Xander's disappearance, and they never suspected anything. The fake

smiles, fake laughter—Ione was good at pretending nothing was wrong. Me, not so much.

“Your aura has darkened,” Peter said, startling me just I stepped away from the crowd. He handed me a glass of bubbly champagne. “This is no night for a grim mood.”

I took the flute from him, putting effort into another smile. “I forgot you can do that.”

“Is everything okay?” he said, sounding genuinely concerned. “Ione’s aura looks just as bleak.”

That’s how he got to her, I realized. Peter was the one person who could see through all Ione’s pretenses.

“It will be.” With that said, I downed the entire flute. “It’s a beautiful party, Peter.”

He beamed. “Thank you, Sheridan.”

Throughout the night, I tried to socialize, interact, and to put on my best face, but it was difficult. After several mindless conversations, I couldn’t take it anymore. I scanned the room, looking for the verandah. Then, I fled there to get some fresh air and a few moments alone.

Wandering into the rose garden, I found a bench hidden within a cocoon of topiary bushes and sat down. Music and laughter floated from inside, but I didn’t hear any of it. I just sat there, numb, still trying to work my mind around that note Ione received.

Heels clicked against the cement behind me, pushing me away from my thoughts. On the other side of the bushes, mages spoke in hushed voices. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I wasn’t ready to abandon the privacy I’d found either.

A squeaky, feminine voice tried to keep quiet, but her whispers could be heard a mile away. “Hollows,” she said, hooking my attention. “Here, at Arcadia.”

I peeked through the leaves, trying to see who was whispering. All I saw were two glittery ball gowns, one in emerald green and the other a bright tangerine. I couldn't see their faces.

"How do you know?" the other girl said—a tall brunette.

"Glyph magic was found on the wall in the girl's bathroom."

"In *Aphrodite*?"

The other one nodded in response.

"Great gods." The brunette shook her head. "The hollow could be one of our own." The two of them moved on, heading back indoors.

I couldn't believe it. I'd read about glyphs in a book from Twilight Island; they were mostly associated with dark magic, drawn with a mixture of blood and quartz, usually to cast hexes. It violated the Mythonian laws of magic, and if they caught the perpetrator, it meant prison time. Knowing all that, I wondered why a hollow would risk coming to Arcadia.

First, the hollowed guard. Now this. All of it, suspicious.

Just as I was about to head back inside, I heard more footsteps. The scent of his magic caught my attention before I saw him, causing my eyes to widen.

"I thought you were leaving." I tried to keep the pain from my voice. It didn't work.

"I am." His voice was so low I could barely hear it without straining. "But I couldn't...not without saying goodbye first."

So, then it was true. Ione's note, everything.

I bit the inside of my cheek. Even coming from him, this still felt like something out of a bad dream.

"Why?"

Several seconds passed in silence, and I realized he had no intention of answering, just like he had no intention of telling anyone where he was going.

I stood up, smoothing out my dress. “Well, I don’t need a goodbye.” That would be far too excruciating to hear.

He came out of the shadows and caught me by the wrist, his long fingers brushing over my rapid pulse.

I turned to face him. He looked miserable. His troubled blue eyes searched mine, surrounded by deep circles. Seeing him like this, knowing there was more to the story, killed me. “Why?” I whispered again. “Tell me why you’re doing this. Help me understand.”

“I can’t.” He swallowed, looking physically pained. “I wish I could, but I can’t.”

It was obvious he didn’t want to hurt me, but there was no way he could leave without hurting me. He had to know that.

Unable to think while he was touching me, I pulled my hand out of his. “Is it because of the Hollowed Guard?”

He looked up at the night sky, as if he was searching for an explanation he didn’t have.

“This isn’t like you.” My voice broke in the middle. “You’re not the guy that runs away with his tail tucked between his legs. You *never* turn down a fight—” I gasped as a possibility occurred. “Did your father threaten to kill me? Like he did with Chloe?”

He winced at the mention of that, repeating the same words over again. “I can’t tell you the details.”

“Oh, go on then.” I waved him off. “Goodbye, Xander. There. It’s said and done.” Better to rip the Band-Aid off than go through this slow torture.

“Don’t make this harder,” he whispered, his voice trembling. “Please.”

“What did you expect? I don’t want any part of this.”

“I know, damsel. I just...” He stared at me silently, asking for something I couldn’t give him. A song streamed out through the balcony, the chords soft and enchanting. Xander held out his hand. “Dance with me?”

I stared at his hand, trying to propel my body away, but I couldn't do it. Something about him in that moment stopped me. His gaze held mine as if he were begging for his life. It was, as if, just by staring into his eyes, I could feel his heart breaking. I hated him for not revealing his motives, but at the same time, I knew him well enough to know he wouldn't leave unless it was important. Xander promised to be my anchor. If he left, it could only mean one thing. He was drowning himself in order to keep everyone else above water.

As angry as I was, I accepted his hand.

His breath came out all at once, choked but relieved. He pulled me close, tucking my head below his chin. I breathed in his evergreen scent, engraving the memory into my soul. We gently swayed to the music—a soft, mesmerizing song. The way his hand pressed against the small of my back sent tingles up my spine. He held me as if I were slipping away, as if he was trying to hang on to the wind. I hated this, but I couldn't leave him either. Instead, I bit down on my lip, trying not to cry.

Stupid, stupid boy.

I wished I could stop him, and my mind scrambled to think of ways. “Take me with you,” I whispered against his shoulder. “Whatever you're fighting, we'll fight it together.”

“I wish that were possible.”

“I could use my bibliomagery like we did on Twilight Island. We can figure out a solution—”

“Damsel,” he sighed. “Just...dance with me.”

I shut my eyes, fighting the sting in them. This fleeting moment wasn't enough. Not after he had given me so much to hope for. This wasn't *fair*. I wanted to fight for him, the way he fought for me. But how could I, if he wouldn't even tell me what was going on?

“I want your best and your worst,” I said softly, recanting his own words back to him. “Your strength and your weakness, your light and your

darkness. They're all pieces of you, and only half is a lie."

He swallowed as if he were choking on broken glass. "What if the lie is all I have left?"

"Then you're a hypocrite," I said, turning my head so he couldn't see the tears building in my eyes.

Leaning down, he rested his forehead against mine and let out a long, slow breath. "If I could, I would carry you off into the sunset, Sheridan. Our world really would be made of sunshine and daises, and I would spend all of my time trying to be worthy of you."

"You already are," I sighed.

I was the one with the monster living inside of me, not him.

Before I knew it, the song had ended. Xander let me go with such suddenness, that I stumbled. He started to walk away, took a few steps, then turned back again. Leaning down, he pressed his lips against mine, crushing me there for only a few quick seconds. I tasted his tears on my lips, and my throat bubbled up in response. Then, he was gone.

I couldn't breathe.

For several long moments, I stood there, forgetting how to do the one thing that should be automatic. When air finally did return to my lungs, I gasped several times over.

But this time, he wasn't coming back.

*PETRA,*  
*Riley's in. Let's do this. Start of Fall.*  
*-Sheridan*

Short and simple, but to the point. I let out a shaky breath. Now that Xander had left, it made the decision much easier. There was nothing anchoring me to Arcadia, and it no longer mattered that he asked me not to go to the Underworld. Xander chose to keep me out of his decisions. I would do the same.

This was happening, *really* happening. The idea of Persephone's Cure had always appealed to me, but the execution was easier said than done. I swallowed. Both of our mothers, Petra and Selena, had survived seventeen years there. Six months was a hiccup compared to that. That's all this was, a hiccup. A short blip of time, and then freedom forever. That was worth it.

A reply came only an hour or so later.

*Sheridan,*

*Your wish is my command. I've found safe accommodations for the two of you. Be ready.*

*-Your Mom*



EARLY SUNDAY MORNING, A KNOCK SOUNDED JUST OUTSIDE THE DOOR. Since Sunday was the only day students had free, I wondered who was crazy enough to disturb us at this hour. None of Ione's friends would dare. They had all partied late into the night, even after the ball had ended. It was possible it was for me, but I didn't care. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping they would get the hint and go away. All I wanted to do was to sleep in late and forget the previous evening had ever happened.

"Sheridan, wake up!" A big booming voice came from outside the door, followed by louder, intense knocking.

Ione didn't even stir. After a while, I was pretty sure if I didn't get up to answer it, the knocking would continue until the whole of House Aphrodite was awake.

I threw open the door, startled to find Cassius standing there, looking way too chipper at this hour.

"Morning, sunshine."

Despite his carefree demeanor, I immediately panicked. If Xander's best friend went to the trouble of coming all the way across campus to find me, that could only mean—"What's wrong?" I blurted. "Is Xander okay?"

"Nothing is wrong." He looked at me like I'd come to the wrong conclusion. "And I have no idea where Xander went, so I don't know if he's

okay.”

It took a few seconds for both of his answers to register. Once they had, I blinked, more confused now than before. “Then why are you here?”

“Before he left, he asked for a favor.”

Xander was not the favor-asking type; he preferred handling even the most difficult tasks on his own, so that he would never be indebted to anyone ever again. “What does that have to do with me?”

“He said you need some training,” Cassius said simply. “And since he can’t be here to do it himself, he asked me to take his place.”

I stared through him, several emotions hitting me at once. For one, I was angry with Xander for not keeping the promise he made to train me himself. But at the same time, it was comforting to know he was still trying to look after me while he was gone.

“I appreciate it, Cassius.” I turned away, heading back inside my room. “But if Xander really wanted to help, he would be here.”

Cassius caught the door right before it closed, following me inside.

“Look, I get it—you’re upset. I’m upset too.” He glanced once at Ione’s sleeping figure, lowering his voice so he wouldn’t wake her. “He left without explaining anything, gave up his house leadership, and dropped all of his classes during what was supposed to be an epic senior year.” He winced at the last part, his tone slightly bitter.

I plopped back down on my bed, crooking a brow. “He really didn’t tell you anything?”

Cassius shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Then, he left us all in the dark.” I nodded toward Ione. “He didn’t even tell his sister.”

“Then we can agree he’s an ass. So, screw him.”

I blinked at that. “If that’s how you feel, why did you agree to help me?”

“I owed him a favor.” He shrugged. “And also, I don’t mind doing it.”

“I see.” I reached for my pillow, squeezing it to my chest. “Well, thank you again. Really. But he should keep his own promises. I’m going back to sleep.” I laid back down, closing my eyes, hoping that would be the end of the conversation.

“Get up, Sheridan.”

Man, this guy was relentless.

“I’m *tired*, Cass. I was up pretty late last night.”

He peeled back the curtains, sunlight flooding into the room. At that point, Ione groaned and pulled her pillow over her head.

“We are training today,” he insisted. “Put on something comfortable, and let’s get going.”

“Why?”

He paused for a long moment before answering. “Because by not training, you’re only hurting yourself. Not him.”

I swallowed. He could have said anything else, and I probably wouldn’t have cared. But for whatever reason, that seemed to do the trick.

“Okay,” I sighed, pushing up off the bed. “I’ll do it.”

Twenty minutes later, I was dressed in sweats and tennis shoes I brought with me from the human world, and we had made our way to a field just outside the woods. A perfect place to train.

“Call for your bow,” Cassius instructed.

That was the last thing I expected. “My bow?”

“Uh, yeah—how else did you think we would train?”

I shrugged. “Honestly, I was going along with this without much expectation.”

He chuckled. “Well, it’s a good place to start. Soul weapons are forged in response to the summoner’s purpose.”

“Purpose?” This sounded a whole lot deeper than I realized. “What does that mean?”

“For example, swords always go to heroes. Think about what the sword means. Historically, you think of defenders, warriors, and great armies of men keeping a duty to their nations. This is the will of the sword—to protect and defend.”

“Polaris,” I said, calling for my bow. It instantly appeared in my right hand, the quill attached to my back. “And arrows?” I said, wondering why I was given that particular weapon.

He tilted his head, a slight curve to his mouth. “The bow and arrow are less common. Most summoners receive swords, but there are always a few exceptions. For every ten swords, you’ll see the occasional spear, staff, or bow. Reina’s battle axe, for example, represents her soul’s purpose to wield her strength. What do you think the bow represents for you?”

My fingers drifted over the jewels encrusted in the gold, and I marveled at the way it glittered in the sunlight. “I have no idea.”

“Think about what the arrow represents. Usually, a direction. Historically, the bow is the weapon of a hunter. Your soul’s purpose is to hunt, to find, and discover. You’re not here to protect anyone, but rather, to journey *toward* something.”

I nodded dazedly, letting that absorb for a few seconds.

Cassius walked to the pine tree and pointed to the middle of its trunk. “To start, we’ll aim here.” Using his fire magic, he marked out an X to guide me.

I stood about twenty feet back, and then Cassius showed me how to hold my bow properly. The first arrow I released didn’t even hit the tree, much less its mark.

“Focus your strength here,” he said, guiding my elbow up. “Everything else is in your aim. Keep both eyes on your mark.”

I let the arrow fly, and this time, it hit the trunk of the tree. I sucked in a breath. It was below its mark, but *still*. I actually hit it.

“Nice,” Cassius said, grinning. “You’ve got natural talent.”

“Thanks.” I grinned back, proud of myself.

We spent the rest of the morning working on my archery, arrow after arrow, until my arms were so sore I could barely lift the bow. Even though it was painful, it was the kind of pain that made me feel as if I were pushing my arms to do what they were always meant to. Every ache reminded me of what I’d accomplished.

Once we were done, Cassius gave me a proud little bow. “You did well, Sheridan.”

“Thanks—and thank you for insisting on teaching me.”

“See you next Sunday,” he promised.

This time, I was looking forward to it.

THE FOLLOWING MONTHS DRAGGED ON, BUT I GOT THROUGH THEM BY staying focused on the plans for fall. In Mirror Realm, Ben and Mia struggled with their own problems. The two of them had only just started dating, but they were planning to attend different colleges, and they saw their time together as temporary. Ben's ex-girlfriend kept making matters worse, showing up at inconvenient times, flirting with Ben all while secretly spreading rumors about Mia.

I didn't know how to help them. I couldn't figure my own love life out, let alone theirs. All three of us were hopeless.

"You sure you want to do this?" Jett offhandedly asked me in class. I had grown tired of trying to ignore her. Besides, answering her questions usually stopped her from invading my thoughts.

"Do what? Study?" We were supposed to be going over our notes for the upcoming final, and I wasn't sure what she meant.

"Go to the Underworld."

I tensed up, struggling to keep my composure. "Did ah...the spirits tell you something?"

How she knew was beyond me. Riley and I were so afraid of getting caught that we didn't even discuss it with each other.

“No.” She half-snorted, half-laughed. “Petra asked me to transport you to the entrance.”

My eyes flared, and I gritted my teeth together. “Exactly how did you become her sidekick?”

I despised that the two of them still communicated. Jett fulfilled her purpose by abducting me when Petra was bent on killing Riley. I didn’t understand why they still kept in touch.

“Oh, that’s right. I never told you...” She smiled sadly. “My mom and your mom were best friends. Or they used to be, before my mom passed onto the spirit realm.”

I opened my mouth, unable to speak. Out of all the things she could have said, I hadn’t been expecting that.

“It was a long time ago,” Jett continued, teary-eyed. She cleared her throat, trying to force the emotion away. “Anyway, I think that’s why it’s been important for me to heal this friendship. That’s what my mom would’ve wanted.”

I was pretty sure our friendship was broken. But hearing that she lost her mom made me see Jett in a new light. It made it easier to understand why she had done the things she did. And why she had been so desperate to get her magic back.

“So,” I said in a lighter tone. “How are we getting there?”

She looked up at me and grinned. “Don’t worry about that—I know a guy.”

I shook my head, unsurprised. “Of course.”





### THREE MONTHS LATER

“DO YOU SEE THE MAN SITTING OVER THERE ON THE STREET CORNER?”

“The beggar?”

“That’s Toad, one of your bodyguards. He’s dressed like that to blend into the background, so passersby don’t notice him.”

“We have bodyguards?”

Petra nodded. “The other is Grey, whom I believe you’re already acquainted with. He’s standing next to the door to your walk-up. If you ever need anything, just ask him.”

*Grey.* He was one of the creatures that abducted me from Arcadia with Jett’s help. The sight of his splitting yellow eyes sent shivers up my spine.

“Why him?” I half-whined.

Petra clicked her tongue. “Why not him? He’s loyal.”

He wasn’t the worst of the lot from last time. There was a green creature who called me a dox and tried to cut off my tongue. I suppose of the two, Grey was the better option.

“Come now, Sheridan. There’s no point in holding grudges. Grey was only following orders. And as I recall, he stopped Ajax from slicing out your tongue.”

Riley, out of nowhere, started chuckling. “Sounds like an interesting story.”

“Yes, you would find it fascinating,” I said, my sarcasm ramping up. “Especially considering you were the one who should have been in my place.”

“Oh, *that* story.” She shivered, putting it together, then went silent.

We walked to the apartment building under the hazy purple sun, hoods pulled up over our freshly dyed hair. It was Petra’s idea to dye it dark brown, one of many precautions.

Curious, we looked around, taking in our surroundings. The Underworld starkly contrasted to our home on Spring Island. Unlike the picturesque setting we’d left behind, this place was cold, lifeless, and dreary. The mages and creatures weren’t friendly. No one smiled, no one met your gaze as you passed, and no one made polite conversation.

As we approached, Grey tipped his hat in our direction. Petra slid her key into the door; the lock clicked open, and the three of us climbed the narrow staircase up to the third floor. At the top, there was another door, this one with no visible keyhole. “It’s spelled,” Petra explained. She moved back to allow me passage. “Trace your finger around the grains in the wood, like this, incanting, *tantum sanguine*.” She demonstrated for me, and the door unlocked from inside. “It will only allow you and your sister entrance. No one else, not even Toad or Grey.”

“That’s comforting.”

When she said she was taking our safety seriously, she wasn’t kidding. So many precautions, and we had only just gotten started.

“Here we are. Come in.” Petra held the door for us. “It isn’t much, but it’s got everything you need.”

The apartment was tiny, only two rooms and a bathroom. The first room included a small kitchen with an old wood-burning stove, a table with two chairs, and not much else. The other was made up of twin beds that looked newly made with fresh linens.

“It will do,” Riley said, nodding.

“There’s food in the cupboards,” Petra continued. “I’ll have either Toad or Grey bring you up some groceries at least once per week. If you have any requests, all you need to do is ask one of them.”

Riley’s face dropped when she realized we were confined to these rooms. “Wait, are you saying we can’t ever leave? What was the point of us coming to the city?”

My chest tightened. This would be difficult for Riley. More than anything else, she craved her freedom. Those last few months in Davidson were almost unbearable because Dad regularly kept her grounded, eating up little pieces of her soul.

Petra took a step toward Riley, narrowing her gaze. “Welcome to the Underworld, my dear. Here, the trees whisper, the creatures keep watch, and the hills really do have eyes. There is almost *nowhere* you can hide without being noticed.”

For someone who wasn’t often intimidated, my sister nervously shuffled her shoes against the wooden floor.

“You wouldn’t survive three days out in the country, much less six months. Here in the city, you have a sliver of a chance,” Petra continued, her tone full of impending doom. “A lamp lit at night, shadows, bursts of laughter, footsteps—things that blend into the humdrum of city noise would only be magnified in the country. One little mistake, and the wrong creature will take notice. Next thing you know, the Hollowed Guard will have your heads on posts. Is that what you want?”

Riley swallowed and shook her head.

“I didn’t think so.” Petra’s biting gaze traveled between the two of us, as if she were debating whether we could pull this off. I couldn’t blame her. I was unsure myself.

“Just because it’s easier to blend in here, doesn’t mean you should unnecessarily draw attention to yourselves. It’s *crucial* that you stay

undetected. Otherwise, it will all have been for nothing. Do you both understand me?"

We simultaneously nodded, like two scolded puppies.

"Good." She cleared her throat. "That being said, I will ask Grey to take you outside for an hour once per week—if and when it's safe to do so."

An hour.

God, that was hardly anything.

"Six months," she said, her tone softening. "Just make it through these six months, and this will all become a bad dream."

"Let's hope so," I whispered, wondering what my life would look like six months from now.

"Very well, then. I'll leave you two to get settled." Petra turned to leave then stopped herself. "Oh, I almost forgot the most important feature!" She went to the bedroom door and swung it around to show us heavy duty metal locks on both sides. "In case either of you find it difficult to be in each other's presence without going for blood..."

I swallowed, casting a wary glance toward Riley.

"We'll be fine," Riley insisted. "As long as there are no scissors in the apartment."

Petra gave us both a curious look, and I choked back a cough. But she didn't ask us to explain.

"I'll check in later, but I'm afraid I can't visit very often. Too many eyes on my back."

I nodded, understanding.

She reached out to stroke my hair, just for the briefest of moments, then she reigned her hand back. It looked like she wanted to hug me, but she was afraid. I wasn't exactly making gestures of affection easier with my standoffish nature.

"Take care of yourselves." She left, and the lock clicked behind her, followed by the sound of her footsteps going down the stairs.

Once she was gone, the two of us hung there silently for a few moments, taking in our new home for the next six months. Riley ventured inside the kitchen, looking around, opening drawers and cupboards. “Oh, hey!” A smirk pulled at her lips. “She left us a deck of cards.”

I scowled, remembering how our last game ended. “Don’t even think about it.”



Later that night, we sat across from each other at the table with mugs full of steaming hot chocolate we found in the cupboard, playing several rounds of crazy eights to pass the time. Figuring out how to work the stove had been tricky at first. But by using our fire-magic, we got a decent fire going, and the chocolate boiled quickly.

“I like your mom,” Riley said offhandedly as she dealt a new hand.

“Really?” Coming from her, that was surprising. “You know her original plan was to murder you, right?”

She snorted. “Can you blame her? If my child was cursed, I would do everything I could to protect them. Your go.”

I discarded the seven of hearts, unsure I believed her. “Even if it meant *killing* their sibling?”

“Depends on the circumstances.”

I tilted my head to the side. “Petra worked as a hollow for the last seventeen years. She used to torture prisoners with her mind magic. What exactly do you like about her?”

“Yes, she’s a little bit evil.” Riley shrugged, as if that were no big deal. “And she’s a little bit sweet. Kind of like you.”

“Ha!” I threw down a six of hearts. “You mean like *you*.”

One corner of her mouth curved. “Everyone has a good and bad side. Even magic is made up of both dark and light.” She discarded the eight of

hearts. “And just like magic, the only side that matters is whichever one you give more energy—I’m changing the suit to clubs.”

She made a really good point.

I’d been so focused on Petra’s negatives, I hadn’t given her positives much consideration. For that matter, I hardly even thought of her as my mother. “She tortured Xander,” I said quietly, tossing my three of clubs.

Riley looked up from her hand. “So? You and I have tortured each other in countless ways, we’ve both tried to kill each other, and yet here we are, playing cards and drinking hot chocolate.”

“That can all be blamed on dark forces manipulating our inner psyches. She doesn’t have the same excuse.”

“She’s not that bad, Sheridan. In case you haven’t noticed, she *didn’t* kill me. And had she been successful in abducting me, you don’t know for sure that she would have gone through with it. Her bark appears a whole lot worse than her bite.”

“She would have gone through with it.”

“You sure about that?” Riley crooked her brow. “Would you stake your life on it?”

I blinked.

Hmm...I don’t know that I would. We were finally here in the Underworld, thanks to Petra. So far, she had only worked to help us—both of us. And if she truly wanted to kill Riley, she would have already done so. Instead, she was taking the riskier route by sheltering us for the next half year.

“You make a good point,” I acceded.

“*And* I play a good game.” Riley laid down her last card.

Dammit, she bested me again. “Another round?”

“Sure,” she grinned, “if you feel like losing again.”

WE SURVIVED OUR FIRST NIGHT IN THE UNDERWORLD UNSCATHED, BUT I was sluggish by the time morning came. The apartment turned into an icebox at night, and we had to keep feeding the stove firewood. The wind howled and shook the walls, and every noise outside intensified. A rowdy pub down the street never went to sleep. Raucous laughter, screeching, and even growling kept me on edge. My imagination went rampant as I considered what kinds of creatures were lurking just beyond our walls. Only after everything quieted down did I finally get any actual sleep. Then I didn't get out of bed until nearly noon, and the only reason I woke up at all was because Riley was shuffling around, making a lot of noise.

Curious, I stood and stretched, wincing at the crick in my neck. Not a great first night, all things considered. But it was one day we could check off of our six-month sentence. One day closer to freedom.

Riley was in the kitchen with her back against the side of the pantry. "Will you help me?" she said, grunting. She pushed her feet against the floor, trying to move a tall cabinet to the right.

"Are you sure that's not nailed into place?" I wondered why she was going to all this trouble just to move it.

"It's been pushed *from* its place." She pointed to the scratches on the wooden floor. "I want to know why."

She was right. It looked as if someone pushed the pantry away from the other cupboards on purpose, as if it used to sit directly beside them.

“Well, now I’m curious.” I joined her in pushing. We heaved once, the wood scraping as we pushed it back into place. Light streaked into the dark room.

“A window,” Riley said, breathless. “I *knew* it.”

Sure enough, there was a small window shaded by curtains. Whether it had been hidden for protection or to curb our curiosity, I didn’t know.

Riley drew back one of the curtains, revealing black bars caging it into place. We exchanged an eerie glance before moving our faces closer. “It’s the street corner.”

I stared outside, where creatures and mages went about their business. There was a pub on the lower level, called the Inky Snake, the same one I’d heard all night long. Some of its patrons were just now leaving, even as the hazy dawn had settled onto the horizon. A centaur stumbled out the door and clumsily trotted down the street, shouting curses at someone named Madam Elga. He was angry for getting cut off and sent home.

A market occupied the opposite side of the street. More apartments filled the second story of buildings, clothes hanging from string, smoke billowing from chimneys. Down a ways, an elderly harpy was busy setting up a vegetable stand. A carriage drove past, pulled by creatures I had never seen before, with shiny black coats and more horns than hooves.

“They’re called robours,” Riley said, noticing the direction of my wide-eyed gaze. “Big and burly, but they can be domesticated.”

“How do you know so much about monsters?” I said curiously.

“When I learned about my ability to summon them, I studied obsessively. I spent hours memorizing every book I could get my hands on.”

I couldn’t imagine having to learn so much without the help of bibliomagery. I realized I hadn’t told her about my own unique ability. For



some reason, I kept it to myself.

“Look, there’s Toad,” Riley said, pointing out our security detail, hidden in plain sight. He sat on the corner, covered in crumpled newspapers and ashes. A fat cigar hung from the side of his mouth, huffs of smoke escaping every few seconds. Beyond Elysium, the Hollowed Castle’s black towers stretched into the violet horizon, a fortress of intimidation and power.

Our faces stayed glued to that window for what must’ve been hours, our only real source of entertainment in an otherwise empty apartment. “Do you think anyone will see us?” I said offhandedly, wondering if that was the reason the window had been hidden away. Or, the reason it had been barred.

“All the way up here? Doubtful.” Riley shrugged, but then she moved her face farther back. “But I suppose it doesn’t hurt to be careful.”

After a while, our stomachs growled.

Riley went to the cupboards. “Let’s see what we can scrounge up for breakfast.”

Between the two of us, she was the better cook. Back in Davidson, she usually prepared the meals, and I did the dishes. If neither of us cooked, Dad resorted to takeout, pizza, or ramen noodles. In that area of our life, we had sorely missed having a mother.

“Five cartons of oatmeal.” Riley crinkled her nose. “I foresee a lot of porridge in our future.”

“At least it’s warm,” I said, trying to make the best of things. “This place is—”

“Freezing,” she finished for me, rubbing the sides of her arms. “I can’t imagine how much colder it gets in winter.”

Yikes. I hadn’t considered that it would get worse. I had become used to a perpetual springtime.

“Let’s add firewood and thick blankets to the list for Toad and Grey.”

She nodded. “Good idea.”

My gaze drifted around the apartment again. It was so small, and there was no TV or books or games or anything else that would have been nice to have in confinement. I stopped at the stone tablet I laid on the table, squinting. *Was that...?*

I ran to it and picked it up. It *was!*

“What is it?” Riley said, crouching by the stove. She put a piece of wood inside, waiting for me to answer.

“The tablet,” I said, bouncing on the balls of my feet. “I must’ve stared at this thing a thousand times, memorizing every detail and crevice.”

“So?”

“So, there’s a crack that wasn’t there before.”

Her eyes brightened. “Really? Let me look.”

I handed it to her. For the first time in what felt like years, she smiled. Genuinely smiled, with nothing but warmth and delight in her gaze. “It’s working,” she breathed out. “It’s really working.”

OUR FIRST FEW DAYS IN THE UNDERWORLD PASSED UNEVENTFULLY. Riley and I didn't know what to do with ourselves. We played a lot of cards, every game we knew. We tried exercising, a hard task in tight confines, even harder to do it quietly. But mostly, we just stared out the window to people watch and commented on the passersby. The intoxicated patrons exiting the pub were always very entertaining; they were usually stumbling, shouting, or singing. The other mages and creatures went about their business in a boring fashion.

Days two and three passed with painful slowness. On day four, we were both restless. Riley paced back and forth as I continued staring out the window. She was worrying me. If she was already feeling this antsy, I wasn't sure how she would get through the rest of our time.

"Didn't Petra mention something about going outside once per week?" Riley said, running a hand through her newly darkened locks.

I nodded. "For an hour."

"Well, it's been nearly a week. Where is our hour?"

"Be patient, Riley. I'm sure we will be able—"

"No." She shook her head. "I can't do this anymore."

She threw open the front door and marched down the stairs. I jumped up—*what* was she thinking? I ran after her, afraid that she might notify the

entire block of our presence.

There, at the bottom, waiting to meet us, was Grey. He stared straight past Riley to me, those yellow eyes of his sending a shiver up my spine. Being this close to him again took me right back to the night Jett abducted me. As far as creatures went, he was pretty intimidating. Scaly skin, pointy black nails, and yellow eyes that reminded me of a snake made up an overall terrifying exterior.

“Go back,” he said, his tone full of warning.

“We’re supposed to get an hour outside,” Riley argued. “Petra told us —”

“Aye, I know what she said. Not today.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not safe.”

“What’s new?” She snorted. “It’s the Underworld.”

“There are creatures in the area who feed off young mages such as yourselves.”

That was enough information to make me want to turn back, but Riley stubbornly put both hands on her hips. “I don’t care.”

“You would, if you encountered one.”

“But—”

“Are you arguing with me, miss?” Grey took a step forward, staring my sister down.

Riley wavered, swallowing in her hesitancy. After a few painful seconds of silence, she finally groaned, giving up. “Do you think you could at least get us a few books to read—we’re bored to tears up there.”

“Better bored than dead.”

Riley scowled, and Grey let out an exasperated sigh. “Fine, I’ll look into it. Now back upstairs, both of you.”

We did as he asked, but Riley stomped the entire way, pouting like a child.

“It’s a prison sentence,” she said, closing the door behind us.

I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. What she almost did, and only on day four of all days, was enough to boil my blood. “That’s exactly what it is, Riley. You knew that.” I spoke carefully, trying to reign my anger back.

“I didn’t know it would be like *this*.” She gestured to our surroundings. “Did you?”

I took a step toward her, my whole body shaking. “If it will break us free of this curse, I don’t care if they throw us into a dark, empty hole for six months.”

She sniffed. “There has to be another way.”

“Don’t you get it?” I said, trying to keep myself from shouting. “No matter what, it will come with a cost. At least this way is better than the sacrifice I nearly made.”

Riley tilted her head to the side, right as I caught my slip. “Better than what sacrifice, Sheridan?”

For several seconds, I debated telling her about Twilight Island. It was my secret, something I wasn’t sure I wanted to share. But I needed her to understand what it took to break magic this strong.

“Before you came to Arcadia, I went to see a man called the Curse Breaker.”

She carefully squared her shoulders, going still. “I’ve heard of him.”

“He needed my womb for the procedure.”

Her face paled. “You didn’t—”

“No,” I said right away, and relief filled her expression. “Xander stopped the whole thing. But if he hadn’t shown up when he did...” The thought made me shudder.

“Geez, Sher,” Riley said, her eyes glassy.

I shook myself, pushing those awful memories out of my head. “My point is, there’s no easy way out. A life was taken in order to bind the curse

to us. We *must* be willing to sacrifice ourselves to remove it. This is your chance. You're either going all-in with me, or you're out of the game."

I wasn't sure if anything I said changed how Riley felt, but it was enough to render her speechless, and enough to make her feel the weight of what we were attempting. From here on out, we had to do whatever it took.

"Okay." She gave me a stiff nod. "I'm all-in."

"Glad to hear it."

RILEY DIDN'T SPEAK MUCH FOR THE REST OF THE NIGHT. SHE COOKED dinner in silence, going through the motions as if she were in a state of numbness. Reality was settling in for her; she may have known about the curse longer, but it seemed she never truly considered the consequences of breaking it. Maybe because she never thought we'd be able to.

After we ate, I cleaned our dishes, and Riley went to bed. On her way out of the room, I heard her mumble something about sleep being her only escape from this hellhole. I pretended not to hear her. She just needed some time, that's all. At least, I hoped so anyway. For both of our sakes.

Since I wasn't tired, I spent the evening staring out the window, bored as usual. Leaning my head against the frame, my mind wandered. It was moments like this, when everything was quiet, that a pair of brilliant blue eyes came to me. If the sky and ocean paired into one entity, they still wouldn't equal the vibrancy of blue in those eyes.

I winced and shook myself—as if I could shake the images right out of my head. But as soon as I stilled, they were back again, hypnotizing me by memory alone.

Ugh.

I hated myself every time my thoughts traveled back to him, but I couldn't *help* it. I wondered where he was. What he was doing. If he was

okay.

I let out a long sigh. Xander made his choice, I reminded myself. He left. In a way, it may have been a good thing. Him leaving finally gave me the courage to do the same.

The trouble was, I still hadn't let him go. My heart still ached in ways I hadn't even known were possible. Not even Connor had caused me this much pain. I sniffed, shaking my head as I thought about that situation. The differences stood out so clearly now. I had never been heartbroken over Connor, not really. That hurt was caused by Riley. Her betrayal had always been the true heartbreak. And with Xander...this was different. The pain was almost physical, as if there was a giant, gaping hole in my chest where there had once been a heart. Unlike Connor, I think...I think maybe I actually loved Xander.

And that's what hurt the most. That it was gone before I ever really knew it was there.

I blinked. Enough with the self-torture.

Instead I busied my mind by focusing on the street corner, going over every inane detail.

Fog. More fog. Everything in the Underworld was bizarrely foggy. Drunk mages argued outside the Inky Snake. An elderly man closed up his shop for the evening. Two nymphs strutted down the sidewalk, arm in arm.

I glanced down, noticing a creature that hadn't been there before, a kind I'd never seen. He stood on the corner, staring up at me with large bulbous eyes.

I backed up.

Could he actually *see* me?

Hiding behind the wall, I peeked out again to get another look. Leathery black wings stuck out from the creature's trench coat. He wore no gloves or shoes, probably due to the gleaming talons sticking out from his hands and



feet. And even from this far up, his sharply angled face was the stuff of nightmares.

When he didn't look away, I moved farther back from the window. He wasn't looking at me. It was just a coincidence. There was no way anyone could see me from that street corner through our window's bars, and in the dark of night.

*Unless* that someone had superior night vision.

I gulped.

For several long seconds I stood there in silence. Everything was fine. Weirdo bat-guy was probably long gone by now. But just to be sure, I should check...so I went back to look again.

He was *still* there.

Still staring.

This time with a wide smile curling his crooked mouth, his pointy fangs sticking out.

My heart rocketed. I drew the curtains closed and ran to the other side of the room, unsure of what to do with myself. I slid down the wall, crouching on the wooden floor, curling my knees against my chest.

A skitter of thumps beat against the wall next to the window, as if something was scaling it. That thing probably could; it had wings. Was it trying to get up here?

*No, you're just hearing things.*

The window had bars on the outside of it, I reminded myself. Thick, heavy, metal bars. There was no way it could get inside. The charm on the bracelet Xander gave me buzzed, sending pulse waves of energy through me. As if it were trying to *warn* me.

My eyes flared as a shadowed silhouette moved beyond those curtains. Oh god, it was him! He moved his head back and forth, trying to look inside.

*Go away. Go away. Go away.*

The shadow vanished. I let out a small breath. Gone, just like that. Maybe he saw the bars and gave up—

Heavy feet crashed against the stairs.

*Holy crapballs!*

I jumped up, moving away from the wall. My body went stiff as I stared at the door. Shadows filled the bottom crack where he stood. He was so close, just on the other side, only a dozen or so feet from me. His voice came out like sizzling embers, crackling and sharp. “Let me in, pretty girl.” The knob rattled loudly, his ragged breath whirring through the crevices.

Good grief, I was about to pee my pants. *Where* were Grey and Toad? I wanted to shout for them, but then that thing would hear me. He’d know I was right there, listening. Well, he probably knew that anyway.

His talon slowly scratched against the outside of the door, sliding against the grains of wood as if he were trying to carve out a hole. “*Magic*,” he hissed. His fist pounded furiously. “You spelled it!”

My heart beating uncontrollably, I ran into the bedroom, shutting the door behind me. Riley sat up in bed. “What’s going on?”

My voice came out all in one rush of air. “Creepster bat-man.” I sucked in a breath. “Saw me.” Another breath. “From the street.”

Her gaze sharpened. I wasn’t making a lot of sense, but she understood enough to know something was wrong.

“Sheridan, calm down.” She threw her covers aside and stood, heading out of the room to inspect.

“Calm down? You want me to be *calm*?” If she had seen that thing—actually she had probably seen all sorts of monsters just as terrifying or worse—but still. If she knew what was out there, she would be freaking out too.

She reopened the bedroom door, her voice still hoarse from sleep. “Where are Grey and Toad?”

“Great question,” I said, on the verge of hyperventilating. It would be nice to have our *bodyguards* around at a moment like this.

“It will be fine,” she said, poking her head out of the bedroom. “He can’t get through the door. He’ll probably go away—”

The creature slammed his fists against the front door again, and Riley jumped back. Her expression went from groggy to wide awake in two seconds flat. “Grey!” she screamed, her voice high-pitched.

The creature mimicked her in a mocking tone. “*Grey* isn’t here.” He laughed, the sound anything but funny. “Open up the door, pretty little human girl. Let me taste your human flesh.”

Riley blinked, going pale. She closed the bedroom door again.

“Hey, can’t you use your summoning magic to send a monster?” I said, hopeful.

“It doesn’t work like that. Summoning takes hours of incantations and careful planning.”

“Awesome.” She was just as useless as I was.

“Come on,” she said, rolling up her sleeves. “Help me move one of the beds in front of this door.”

I did as she asked, not that it would help much. If the creature managed to get past the spelled front door, it wouldn’t have a problem getting past an unspelled one. But we got behind the bed anyway, pushing and heaving until it was shoved in front of the door to make ourselves feel safer.

“What should we do now?” Riley said, lowering herself onto the remaining bed. In the span of the last few moments, she had taken my place as the nervous wreck. Watching her panic forced me to get a grip on myself. We couldn’t *both* freak out.

“We wait and hope to God that thing doesn’t get in.”

The two of us sat on the other bed, cuddled up next to each other. We stayed like that, very still, listening for the creature. “In case we die,” I said,

swallowing. “You should know I’m sorry about stabbing you with those scissors.”

Riley raised a brow, glancing at me. “Really?”

I nodded. I’d never felt guiltier about anything in my whole life.

She chuckled. Out of every possible reaction, I wasn’t expecting that. “What?”

“Nothing.” Her lips curved into a half-grin. “I was just thinking of how much I hated kissing Connor. His breath always smelled like Cheetos.”

I punched her in the arm.

“Ow.” She rubbed the spot where I punched her. “Nice one, sis. Apologize for stabbing me. Then punch me two seconds later.”

This time we both laughed, which abruptly stopped at the sound of skittering on the roof. “You think he’s looking for another way inside?” she said, casting a wary glance at the ceiling.

“He won’t find one up there, not unless he can fit through the oven pipe.”

She squeezed a pillow close to her chest, her knuckles turning white. “I’m going to murder Grey next time I see him.”

“To be fair, he *did* warn us about there being bad creatures in the area.”

She blinked, remembering. “He said they feed off young mages. What if this one gets some of his cannibal friends to help him break in?”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t.”

“If he does, they can eat you first. That way I can experience a few blissful moments of life without being cursed.”

“Well, I was born first,” I said with a half-shrug. “So, I guess it’s only fair.”

Her eyes twinkled, and she choked back a laugh. “Yeah, I found out about that, too.” She shook her head as if she hardly believed it. “You’re the eldest. Go figure.”

The next few minutes passed like hours, each second ticking by with a painful slowness. We heard the creature along the walls and at the door, relentless in his attempt to find a way inside.

“I’m sorry about Connor,” Riley said, her voice so low I strained to hear her. “But he didn’t deserve you.”

I looked at her, forgetting the creature. “What makes you say that?”

“He cheated too easily,” she said, hesitant. “Now, Xander on the other hand, is made of stone. That one only has eyes for you.”

My brows shot up. “What makes you say *that*?”

She shrugged. “I may have tried to do the same with him—”

“Riley!”

“What?” she said, all innocence. “I thought this was confession hour.”

I slit my eyes, returning my attention to the door. “You need a confession *week* to get through all of your sins,” I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Oh, let it go.” She chuckled. “Hey, the noises stopped. I think he might be gone.”

Just then, a knock sounded at the door. “Girls?” said a throaty voice. “Are you okay?”

It sounded like Toad.

Together, we pushed the bed away from the door and left the bedroom.

“Toad, is that you?” Riley said, her tone full of distrust.

“It is,” he said. “No need to open up. Just wanted to let you know the creature that was bothering you won’t anymore. He’s been eliminated.”

*Eliminated?*

Riley and I exchanged a wide-eyed look. “Where’s Grey?” she said.

“He’s ah, indisposed at the moment.”

“What happened to him?”

“No need to worry. He’ll return soon enough,” Toad said, dodging the question. “I’m heading back to my post on the street. Night.”

Before we could ask more questions, we heard his boots thumping down the steps. I should probably be upset about Toad's lack of explanations—we both should. But my relief overshadowed everything else.

GREY NEVER WOULD SAY WHERE HE WENT THAT NIGHT, WHICH annoyed Riley to no end. She kept insisting he was hiding something from us. It bothered her that I was so unbothered by the secrecy, but I couldn't help it. Deception was something I'd grown to expect from people, including her.

After the incident, things got better. We spent the next several days practicing caution. If we looked out the window, it was by peeking through the curtains and only for short periods. Mostly, we just hung out and talked, which was something Riley and I hadn't done in a long time.

The following week Grey surprised us with our first outing. It happened first thing at dawn, when most people were still asleep. He took us to a cluster of woods in a remote part of the city. We walked uphill through the trees until I was nearly out of breath and my leg muscles were burning. I didn't complain though, too grateful for the exercise. Being outdoors, breathing the fresh air, and feeling the strange hazy sunlight warm my skin was enough to keep me going for miles.

We stopped at a small clearing. I hadn't seen much of the Underworld, but this was the greenest, sunniest place I'd come across so far.

"Amazing," Riley said, her mouth curving into a wide smile. "A hidden paradise in the middle of hell."

Grey hid his smile. “Glad you like it.”

“It’s wonderful,” she insisted. “Thank you.”

Damn. I’d never seen Riley be this grateful for anything.

“Can I practice my archery?” I said, spotting a tree with a wide trunk.

Grey nodded. “Do whatever you want. We’ll stay an hour.”

I spent the entire hour shooting arrows while Riley went for a walk. By the end of the hour, my entire body was sore in the best way. We had both needed this, the fresh air and exercise. It lifted our spirits.

This same routine continued on for the next several weeks. Grey brought us to the clearing for exactly one hour to do whatever we wanted. I always practiced my archery, getting a little better every week. Riley decided she needed to practice with a weapon too, and so, she convinced Grey to fence with her. The two of them usually spent the hour fencing with dull swords while Toad stayed on lookout-duty, keeping watch at the bottom of the hill. Riley was competitive; but good thing for Grey, he had more skill than I did with a sword. That hour was always something we had to look forward to, something that helped the week pass a little quicker.

As time went on, I picked up on something I hadn’t expected—Grey had magic. The strangest part was, it didn’t feel dark. Curious, scholarly, and fueled by nature, his magic wasn’t something he used often, hidden just beneath the surface. When Riley and I were alone in the apartment again, I told her about it.

“I’ve known for a while,” she said, as if it were no cause for alarm. “I think he’s some sort of creature-mage hybrid, if such a thing exists. Like you said before, everyone has their secrets. He doesn’t come off as a threat to me.”

He didn’t come off as one to me either. I’d been quick to judge him when we first arrived in the Underworld, basing my opinion on his appearance and my experience with Ajax, the guard who tried to kill me.



Honestly, Grey wasn't all that bad. He and Riley were developing a friendship of sorts. She would venture down the stairs to bring him a mug of hot cocoa, and the two of them would talk for a while. He even brought the books Riley requested. When she offered me one, I asked her to read aloud, pretending my eyes bothered me.

"You've never had a problem with your vision before," she said, skeptical.

"Well, things change," I said with a shrug. "I'm getting older."

She fell for it.

And for the first time since I discovered bibliomagery, I enjoyed the sweet slowness of reading again. I curled up on my bed, listening along in suspense as Riley's even voice filled the apartment, each word a new and exciting addition to the story. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate my unique ability, but there was something nice about letting a story unfold naturally. Even better, there was something nice about the time we spent together. I began to grasp the Underworld's profound ability to transform people. We were surrounded by terrifying creatures, monsters, and all varieties of evil. Darkness enveloped us; and somehow, it brought us closer. Go figure.

“DO YOU THINK IT’S GETTING ANY BIGGER?”

Riley was referring to the crack in the stone tablet. She’d been staring at it for the last fifteen minutes, analyzing the hairline crack with careful precision.

“Possibly.”

It looked the same as it did yesterday, but I didn’t want to squash her hope.

She set it aside, frowning. This had become a ritual for her, checking the tablet every morning, obsessing over whether the crack had grown. But I supposed even obsessive rituals were welcome in a place like this.

“Do you notice how Grey goes missing once a month?” she said, off-handedly, glancing at the door. “He left when the creature tried to break-in, and again last month on the full moon.” Her eyes widened as an idea occurred. “Do you think he’s a *werewolf*?”

I laughed at her conclusion. “Do werewolves exist?” She would know. Between the two of us, she was the expert on monsters.

“They do exist.” She frowned. “But, he can’t be. They have a distinct magic—you can smell it. Guess I can cross that off the list.”

Riley had always enjoyed playing detective. It bothered her when she couldn’t figure people out. And now that we had loads of time on our hands,

this thing with Grey had become her new pet project—a mystery she needed to solve.

“Vampire?” I supplied for her.

She snorted. “Vampires have been extinct for the past century.”

“Hmm...” I drummed my fingers along the table, thinking. “What about a demon?”

Riley straightened, considering that. She shook her head. “No, I doubt that. His magic feels too pure.”

I shivered; winter was setting in, and it was getting colder. I got up and added more wood to the stove. Thanks to our Ares magic, we always had a fire going, but by nightfall we were freezing. It got so bad, Riley and I moved our mattresses out of the bedroom and into the kitchen each night to stay warm.

Later that evening, Petra visited for dinner. She tried to visit at least once or twice per month, and she always brought loads of food with her. Each time she came, she brought Riley a letter from Selena. The first time she had done this, Riley locked herself in the bedroom, emerging later with red eyes and a dreamy smile. “Good news,” she said, patting my shoulder. “You’re not my only sibling.”

“Oh, thank god,” I teased her. “Now you can focus on killing someone else.”

She chuckled, then told me she had three brothers, two of which were twins. “I can’t wait to meet them.”

“Me too,” she sighed. “If that ever happens.”

Tonight was no different; Petra didn’t disappoint. She showed up with steamy tomato soup, shepherd’s pie and cinnamon poached pears, all things she cooked herself. And as always, she brought a letter from Selena and a large bottle of red wine, something Dad would have never given us in the human world. But in Mythos, you were considered old enough to drink alcohol once your magic rooted inside of you.

After dinner, we all shared the bottle until we were giggly and our insides were warm. This was Riley's favorite time to share stories about our childhood, mostly the embarrassing ones. Petra's whole face lit up, but there was sadness in her gaze too. She tried to hide it, but not being a part of our memories bothered her.

Riley told her about the time she put honey in my hair while I was sleeping—revenge because I drew on her face with a sharpie the night before—causing all three of us to laugh until our bellies hurt.

Petra let out a wistful sigh. "Ah, I wish I could have seen that."

I swallowed, wishing the same thing.

Sensing the conversation had steered toward a more serious tone, Riley cleared her throat. "We didn't tell you the best part," she said, grinning, "Once we were bored with pranking each other, we decided to prank *Dad*."

"Oh, that's right." I covered my face in shame as it came back to me. "The fireworks."

Petra's dark brows lifted. "What did you do?"

"We set them off in his shed," Riley said. "While he was *in* there."

Petra covered her mouth to hide her grin. "Daniel must've been livid."

"He grounded us for a month for that stunt," I recalled, chuckling. "He did not find it as funny as we did."

"What a shame," she said. "He used to have such a wonderful sense of humor."

The comment quieted all of us, our laughs dying down. I think Riley and I both kept forgetting that Petra and Dad had a past before we came along.

"He's an idiot for letting you go," Riley said, always the blunt one between the two of us. "You seem like you would've been perfect for each other."

Petra snorted, her cheeks reddening. "Yes, well...I guess we all make our choices, don't we?" She yawned and stood. "I'm tired; I think it's time I

go.”

More like, a good time to exit the conversation.

Riley left to use the bathroom and I walked Petra to the door. As she was leaving, I said, “You should talk to him, if you ever get the chance.”

“Your dad?” She straightened and narrowed her gaze on me. “What for?”

“He said you were the love of his life.” I shrugged awkwardly. “That seems kind of big for him.”

At first, I didn’t think it was a good idea that he held out hope for Petra, and I told him so back at Arcadia. But now that I was getting to know her, I realized she wasn’t as evil as I first thought. I don’t know...maybe there was hope after all.

But Petra looked at me as if the idea disgusted her. “If I never talk to him again, that’s fine with me.”

Okay then—scratch that. No hope at all.

She lightened her tone. “You, however,” she said, squeezing my hand. “I will miss talking to you once you leave this place.”

“Same,” I said, meaning it.

As she went down the steps, I sighed. I’d been thinking about leaving ever since we arrived, but I hadn’t considered what that meant. Petra was stuck here forever, and it wasn’t *fair*. She should have been in my life before, just like she should stay in my life now. But pledges were more binding than curses. Pledges were a conscious choice. Whenever mages pledged themselves, the magic was unbreakable. Their pledge was just as much attached to them as their own limbs. As much as I wished I could bring my mom home with me, that would never be possible.

THE TRAMPLED SNOW COATING THE ALLEYS IN THE MARKET WAS ALL gray and black from the passing carts. Mages and creatures had flocked to the city center in hordes, setting Grey on edge. He held my arm protectively, mumbling curses under his breath. “Should’ve never agreed to this today.”

“But I need to buy presents,” I reminded him sweetly.

“Aye, I know. For Christmas, or whatever nonsense holiday you have.”

“You don’t celebrate Christmas in the Underworld?” That wasn’t surprising though. Nothing about this place was remotely jolly.

“Definitely not.” Grey sniffed. “Let’s see, we have Dragon’s Day, the Festival of Tears, Parade of Monsters, All Hallows Eve—”

“Oh, we celebrate Halloween, too. In the human world,” I said, glad to find something we had in common.

His voice lowered to an anxious growl. “Let’s just get your gifts and get out of here, fire-blood. It’s much busier than I expected.”

I nodded and the two of us pressed on, heading to a jewelry stand. The idea of buying Riley a charm bracelet made me smirk. She would, no doubt, wonder if I had poisoned it. As hilarious as that would be, I’d better not. This particular gift needed to be a peace offering. A final white flag.

“These would look pretty on her,” Grey said, pointing to a pair of yellow jade earrings.

“They would,” I agreed, my lips curving on one side. “You should get them for her.”

“Me?” Grey sputtered, blood rushing to his scaly cheeks. “But I—that wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“Why not?” I placed my hands on my hips. “You’re her friend, after all. Friends get each other gifts, and Riley would *love* those.”

He stared at the earrings, deep in thought, as if he were considering it.

“I’ll just be over there while you decide.” I nodded toward the following cart.

Grey waved me on. “Don’t go too far,” he warned.

“I’ll be fine.”

As I ambled toward the next set of wares, Grey stayed back and bartered over the price of the earrings. I smiled to myself. His and my sister’s weird relationship was kind of sweet.

“See anything you like, miss?” A spiky-haired dwarf peeked out from behind his cart’s table. He wore a cheery red scarf and he smiled at me—a gesture I rarely came across in the bleak and dreary Elysium.

My gaze stopped on a pair of burgundy leather gloves with silver buttons. They looked like something Petra would wear. I was about to ask for their price, but several shouts distracted me—some kind of commotion. The crowds shifted toward the market’s center fountain, where a line of Hollowed Guard emerged. In a big, booming voice, one of them shouted, “Clear the street!”

“What’s going on?” I asked the dwarf, curious.

He rolled his eyes. “The royals are visiting today. People always lose their minds when they’re in the city.”

No wonder it was so crowded. Clearly, Grey and I chose the wrong day to shop. I pointed to the gloves, ready to get out of there. “How much for

those?”

“Two wots.”

An extravagant price, but I didn’t want to waste time bartering. “Wrap it up for me please, and quickly.”

A gleam filled his eyes at the ease of the sale. “Right away, miss.”

He went to work, making friendly conversation as he rolled the gloves in decorated paper. “The crowds aren’t usually this terrible, but everyone wants to catch sight of the hollowed prince.” He cut a long piece of twine, then strung it around the wrapped gloves. “Ever since his return, people are curious.”

A centaur trotted past, kicking muddy snow up onto my boots. I shook my foot to get the snow off before it soaked through to my socks, only half-paying attention to the dwarf’s chattering.

“Of course, his return.” I was clueless about hollowed royalty, but it sounded like common knowledge. Since I was trying to blend in, I nodded along, pretending I understood whatever the dwarf was talking about.

He tied the twine into a neat little bow. “To be honest, I’m a little curious myself. I’d like to know where his allegiances lie since he’s the crown prince. Four years is a long time to be gone. Course, his father before him left for nearly a decade, trying to win over that wealthy Mythonian girl. You never know what that family is scheming.”

I dug through my pocket for the wots, offering a polite smile. “Thank you again,” I said, giving the dwarf the coins.

“Of course, miss.” He handed me the wrapped gloves and tipped his head. “Pleasure doing business.”

I took a few steps back toward Grey, then stopped suddenly. That last part struck a strange chord in me. Four years...a decade...why did those time frames sound so familiar?

“Hey, ah,” I spun around, “my mind went blank—what’s the prince’s name again? The one who returned?”



The dwarf looked up. “Prince Leo?”

I exhaled, shaking off the prickliness that came over my skin. For a moment, I had thought—

“*Prince Lucian Trophonius Alexander Leo*,” the dwarf clarified. “But they say he goes by Xander.”

I hiccupped. Xander’s last name was Arius. It was just a coincidence.

But I had to see for myself.

My instincts told me to move away from the crowd, but instead, I pushed my way through it. Adrenaline pumped through my veins with every step. Not *my* Xander, I chanted over inside my head. The closer I got to the guards, the harder it was to see. Frustrated, I looked around for a higher vantage point.

The fountain.

I went back and climbed up onto its ledge, careful to keep from slipping in my snow trodden boots. Once I was higher up, I looked over the wall of creatures and mages, searching for signs of him.

A silhouette wearing a royal crest exited a shop. It had to be him. I held my breath as the figure moved into the hazy sunlight, my heart drumming in my ears. He took a few more steps, and then—

*No.*

Dark hair waved around the same chiseled face I dreamt about every night, a little longer than the last time I’d seen him. Slightly crooked nose. Familiar gladiator build. And although I wasn’t close enough, I knew those eyes were the bluest I’d ever seen.

My stomach dropped out from under me. I stepped off the fountain ledge, the sea of faces around me a blur. My ears rang, my heart thumped at an uncontrollable pace, and I felt like I might pass out at any second.

The crown prince of the Underworld was *my* Xander.

I DIDN'T REMEMBER THE WALK BACK TO THE APARTMENT. AT SOME point, Grey took my arm and guided me. My feet moved, air went in and out of my lungs, but I blacked everything else out. Then, once I was safely inside, I went to the chair by the window and sat, staring at the curtains. Riley said something, but her voice was far away. Then, she and Grey spoke in hushed voices, but I didn't listen, unable to focus. It felt like I was cocooned inside my own sea, everything else distorted and murky. Nothing made sense anymore. Nothing ever would.

*"Have I ever lied to you?"*

His voice echoed in my ear, an obscure, distant memory.

*"No, I don't think so," I replied.*

*"Then let me be your anchor. Even if you can't trust yourself, trust me."*

I did as he asked; I trusted him. He never lied, not exactly, but he didn't reveal the truth either. He told me little bits and pieces of his life, but never *this*.

How was it even possible? How could no one else know he was the hollowed prince? I blinked, thinking of Ione.

*"You're not the only one with secrets bad enough to ruin you. I've gotten good at lying."*

They kept this hidden.

When Xander disappeared, she must've known where he went, but she couldn't say anything. If she had, she would've revealed who *she* really was.

I sat there for a long time, staring at nothing. Riley left me alone, sensing I needed space. I barely noticed when she started cooking, not until she shoved a bowl of soup in front of me. "Enough," she said, her tone stern. "You've been sitting there all day. Tell me what happened at the market."

She lowered herself into the chair across from me, and I had to concentrate on her face. Her direct gaze was a little startling; worry wasn't something she usually expressed, definitely not for me anyway.

But she was right; I needed to snap out of this shock.

"I saw Xander," I said quietly. "He's the crown prince of the Underworld." Hearing the words from my own lips didn't make them feel realer.

Riley's brows shot up, her mouth forming an O. "Golden boy gladiator?" She let out a whoosh of breath. "I did *not* see that coming."

Perfect, beautiful Xander. Leader of House Ares. No one could have guessed this.

"That's why he left?" she said, putting it together. "To come here?"

"Seems that way."

She shook her head, lost for words. "Now, I understand why you couldn't speak."

That only scratched the surface. When I saw Xander, it felt like someone kicked me in the stomach, knocking the wind out of me. Like someone was playing a cruel joke.

Riley placed her hand over mine, and I looked up. She used a boy to hurt me; the last thing I expected was her empathy.

"Maybe you can ask Petra about him."

I nodded.

Petra was supposed to visit tomorrow night for dinner. She had connections inside the Hallowed Castle. If anyone knew anything, she would.

I REPEATEDLY TOLD MYSELF I WOULDN'T BOMBARD PETRA WITH questions about Xander. I planned to play it cool, wait until after everyone ate, and then casually bring it up. But the moment she walked inside, all of that went out the door. She hadn't even hung her coat on the hook before I confronted her.

"Why didn't you tell me Xander was the prince?"

Caught off guard, it took Petra a second to process the question. She carefully set the large bag of food she was carrying on the table, then peeled off her coat. "Nice to see you, Sheridan."

"Yeah, yeah." Without thinking, I leaned into give her a quick hug. "Nice to see you, too. Why didn't you tell me?"

Her eyes flared; and it dimly hit me that in all the time we'd spent together, I had never hugged her. But Petra didn't make a big deal of it. Instead, she turned to greet my sister. "Hello, Riley. There's a letter from your mother inside of my bag."

Riley's expression lit up, and she went to retrieve it.

"As for your question," Petra said, turning back around. "I assumed you already knew. After all, he's your boyfriend."

"Was." I emphasized the past tense.

“Oh.” She tried to look sympathetic, failing miserably. “Sorry it didn’t work out.”

“I bet.”

I couldn’t even blame her. Petra watched her mother get burned before her, then ended up trapped in the Underworld as a result of her last relationship. She would probably always be jaded.

“And no, Xander never mentioned it,” I said, noticing the way she refused to make eye contact. “He kept his identity a secret.”

“How did you find out?” She began emptying the contents of the bag; a roasted chicken that smelled heavenly, along with several other containers of food.

“I saw him in passing, at the market,” I said, without thinking.

She snapped to attention, her voice rising several octaves. “What were you doing *there*? On Zeus’s grave, I’ll have Grey’s head—”

“Relax, I was perfectly safe, and I happened to be searching for a gift for you.”

“A gift?” That seemed to appease her enough to calm her down. “That’s sweet, but unnecessary, Sheridan. The only gift I want is to break your curse.”

I pressed my lips together, noticing the way she steered the conversation to a new subject, trying to dodge all talk of Xander. Riley was no help either; she was curled up next to the stove, fully engrossed by Selena’s letter. Somehow, I needed to get Petra to tell me everything she knew.

“I’ve been fed too many lies,” I said, evening my tone. “About you, about everyone. This is *important* to me, Petra. I need to know the truth.”

She removed the last item from the bag—a large bottle of enchanted wine—then set the bag aside. “I only recently discovered he was back,” she admitted, meeting my gaze. “But I don’t know why. That boy fought so hard to escape his title, the hollows, and his entire life in the Underworld.

He stood so firm in his convictions; it's hard to believe he would let them all go."

"So then, his accusations were true?" I said, trying to understand. "Why would they kidnap and torture their own prince?"

"The throne is connected to the Leo bloodline. The Hollowed Council acts on command of the king. If the crown doesn't get passed onto Xander, it all falls apart. A prince has never refused his own crown before, but Xander wasn't raised under the Council's indoctrination. He was born with the name Arius, with no knowledge of his inherited title."

"The king never told him," I said, remembering the conversation we had at the lake.

*My father comes from a long line of hollows.*

In a way, Xander had told me, without actually telling me. "When you used your mind magic on him, what did you make him see?"

It was a loaded question, one that Petra was hesitant to answer. She sat down, gesturing for me to do the same. "They asked me to create scenarios involving his mother and sister dying, screaming his name, calling for his help."

I held my hand over my heart. That must have been awful, to repeatedly relive his worst nightmare.

I had hoped Petra could offer more answers than this. Sensing my frustration, Petra pulled out a chair and sat next to me. "Look, all I know is he's back and he's planning to pledge soon—"

"Pledge?!" I nearly shrieked. "But that means..."

It meant he would be stuck here forever.

"I have to see him," I said, feeling the panic bubble up in my throat. I looked at Petra. "Is there any way you can get me into the Hollowed Castle?"

"Absolutely not." Petra's whole face tightened. "If Thomas Vane discovers your presence in the Underworld, everything we've done will be

for nothing. If the curse doesn't kill you, *he* will."

She was probably right. Thomas Vane was my grandfather. Riley's too. He was Petra's father, but there was no familial bond. He was the one who cursed us, the one who wanted us dead.

The wheels in my mind turned over. "I can go in disguise," I said, forming a plan. "Thomas will never even know I was there—"

"*No.*" Petra refused to budge. "The danger is too great."

I opened my mouth to argue, but Riley, who was now paying attention to our conversation, stopped me. "Sheridan," she said, giving me a pressing look. "Remember what we spoke about in the stables, back at Arcadia?"

I glanced at Petra, whose knuckles had turned white as she gripped the arms of her chair. *Never reveal all your cards*, Riley had said. This was her way of telling me it was a pointless argument. Just as Dad would never have let me come to the Underworld, Petra would never let me step one foot inside that castle.

I would have to find a way in on my own.

Trying not to give myself away, I slowly nodded in Riley's direction but kept my gaze on Petra. "You said to stay focused on breaking the curse," I lied.

Petra's shoulders relaxed. "Extremely sound logic. I have to agree with your sister on this, Sheridan."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. As much as I hated it, I didn't bring Xander up again for the rest of the night. Because no matter what I said, it wouldn't change Petra's mind.

Unlike Riley, it was difficult for me to conceal my emotions. Dinner was tense. I suffered through it in silence while Riley and Petra made everyday conversation.

Once it was over and it was time to leave, we said our goodbyes and I walked Petra to the door. She gave me a pained look. "I'm sorry about Xander, Sheridan. Heartbreak can be a cruel, tormenting thing..." She



sighed, obviously speaking from her own experience. “I will try to find out why he returned.”

I nodded stiffly. “Thank you.”

“I’ll see you again on Christmas,” she promised, reaching out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “Stay safe.”

I closed the door, with no intention of obeying. Right away, I set to work. First, by getting a pencil and scrap paper. Then, I began making a list.

Riley hovered over my shoulder, reading off the items. “Rose petals, willow’s bark—dove feathers?” She furrowed her brow. “What is this, Sheridan?”

Finished, I folded it up and handed it to her. “Ingredients,” I answered. “Will you give this to Grey and ask him to retrieve the items ASAP?”

She tilted her head to the side. “Ingredients for what?”

“A love potion.”

“Apollo’s sake, Sheridan. *Why* are you making a love potion?”

“Because like you once told me, I’m giving myself permission.”

GREY DIDN'T LIKE THAT RILEY WOULDN'T TELL HIM THE REASON FOR my list, but he agreed to get the items anyway. Probably because Riley begged him, and he'd grown sweet on her. I was pretty sure that if she asked for the moon, he would find a way to get it for her.

After he rounded up the items, it took three days to brew the potion. Curious about the process, Riley helped me every step of the way.

Once I was done, I drew a deep breath and asked Riley for the permission I hadn't asked from Petra. "I know we're four months into this," I said carefully. "If you don't want me to go—"

"I want you to go," she said, surprising me. "Xander saved your life. If you don't go before he pledges, you'll regret it forever."

"You're sure?"

She nodded.

"When did you become so considerate?" I was teasing, but I was also a little distrustful. Old habit, I supposed.

"I do have an ulterior motive," she admitted. "I want to go to the castle, too."

*Selena.*

She wanted to see her mom.

I swallowed. This whole time, I'd been able to bond with mine, but she had never laid eyes on hers.

Nodding, I said, "Let's see what Jonas can do."

I spun his seal of support on the wooden floor, watching in awe as the coin floated up into the air. It erratically spun, creating a vortex of energy in the middle of our little apartment. Seconds later, Jonas was there in his navy blue toga, looking like a deer in headlights. When he saw me, his expression broke into a wide smile. "You used my seal," he said, his tone full of excitement. "That means—"

I held out the potion vile. "I have your potion. It's extremely powerful."

His chocolate brown eyes lit up. "How long does it last?"

"The effects should last a full month."

He frowned. "My invisibility charms don't last that long." His gaze traveled back and forth between Riley and me. "By the way, where are we?"

"Never mind that." I cleared my throat. "What *can* you offer?"

He chewed on the inside of his cheek, debating. "I do have something..." Closing his eyes, he whispered a spell and a velvety black robe appeared in his hands. "This is an ancient family heirloom—it will conceal you in any situation. I can lend it to you for a month."

I glanced at Riley, and she nodded in approval. A month was more than enough time for us both to use the robe and get inside the castle. "We have a deal."

"Once the month is up, the robe will return to me. Take good care of it."

"I will." We traded, exchanging the vile for the robe, and Jonas looked like we'd just given him a puppy.

"Who's the lucky mage?" Riley asked, smirking.

"Someone who wouldn't normally give me the time of day," he said vaguely. "But now I have a month to change her mind."

"Use it wisely," I advised.

“You as well.” He tipped his head toward the robe. “No magic can detect it, but other senses can. Meaning, if you bump into someone, they will feel it. If you wear perfume, they will smell it. If you leave footprints in the dirt, people will see it.”

I nodded. “Good to know.”

I would have to be extremely careful. If I was going to pull this off, I couldn’t take any chances.

THE HARD PART WAS OVER. I HAD A WAY INSIDE. NOW, I JUST NEEDED to execute my plan. I gave myself the night to rest; but I didn't waste time, readying myself the very next morning.

"Hitch a ride with the fruit carts," Riley suggested before I left. "I see them travel to the castle every day."

"Good idea."

She gave me a once over. I was dressed all in black, and in matching boots that didn't make any noise when I walked. My hair was pulled back into a tight bun, my roots freshly died too. Not that anyone aside from Xander would know my hair or face. But if I needed to remove the invisibility robe, I would appear less conspicuous. The only noteworthy thing I wore was Xander's charm bracelet. I was as ready as I could be.

I slid Jonah's robe over my body, placing the hood well over my head.

Riley sucked in a breath. "Incredible," she breathed, reaching out to touch me. "I see right through you, Sheridan."

Her hand found my shoulder, patting it.

"Good," I said, relieved. That meant Grey and Toad wouldn't see me leave, and Petra would never find out.

Now that it was time for me to go, her brow knotted in worry. "Take care of yourself, sister."

I swallowed. “I will.”

Grey was leaning against the side of our building, reading a newspaper. Toad was at his usual corner, eating a sandwich. I snuck past them both with ease.

Taking Riley’s advice, I hitched a ride on a fruit cart, making myself comfortable atop a mound of oranges. It was a long ride to the castle, and I had been so anxious that I didn’t get any sleep the night before. So, I closed my eyes and drifted off, letting myself take a nap. Two hours later, I awoke to hollowed guards directing our cart through the castle gate.

I sat up and took in my surroundings. From this vantage point, the Hollowed Castle looked like something out of a nightmare. Built of black stone, its twisty turrets and towers stretched high into the clouded sky, a fortress built on intimidation, fear, and reckoning. Somewhere inside were the doors to the seven hells, places where they sent prisoners as punishment. Just looking at it made me shiver; I didn’t want to go in there, but I had to—for Xander.

I hopped off the cart as people mulled about, exchanging wares and discussing mundane things. No one noticed me; my invisibility was holding strong beneath the trusty robe. From there, it was easy to get inside. I made my way through the servants’ entrance, following a group of delivery men. The next room was some type of storage area. Beyond that was a busy kitchen, where several cooks prepared meals. I kept following the hall, which led me to another supply room, and then a staircase where a maid was getting scolded. “Everything must be spotless for the ceremony,” said a plump woman with graying hair. “Smudges and footprints are all over these stairs. It is unacceptable.”

I rounded the corner, staying close to the wall to give myself a wide birth. My biggest worry was of someone discovering my presence by knocking into me.

Upstairs, the rooms looked more formal, making me think I'd found my way out of the servants' quarters. A mural of a black lion with a serpent twisted in its mane decorated the wall in the next room—symbols of the union between the hollows and Leo family. I stopped to stare at it for several seconds, then shook myself. My goal was to find Xander.

Voices traveled from up ahead, and I followed them. Two mages dressed in fancy clothes discussed politics and smoked on magic cigars that created pictures in the smoke as they exhaled.

In another room, several ladies in gowns at their breakfast, gossiping over ongoing in the Underworld.

For a long time, I continued on like this going from room to room, in awe of how expansive the castle was. Eventually, I found myself in what I believed was the main hall, where servants were busy decorating in preparation for whatever celebration everyone was talking about.

A mage who was spelling the ceiling said, "Seems like this ceremony is the biggest event in the Underworld's history."

"Everyone is talking about it," agreed a maid who was busy dusting.

I turned to leave the hall, nearly colliding with a girl who was on her way inside. I blinked, in shock. It was *Jett*. She wore a long black gown with the hollowed emblem.

Unable to recover, I stood there and stared for several long seconds as Jett continued on her way, none the wiser. I wanted to follow her, find out what she was doing in the Hollowed Castle, but I stopped myself. I would figure out what she was scheming later, but for now—I needed to find Xander.

So, I carried on with my search, going through each room, hoping to find some sign of him. When I came upon shut doors, I made sure no one was around before carefully opening them.

The longer I searched, the more frustrated I'd get. Before long, I was lost, with no idea which way was which. The castle was too big, and I was

beginning to think I'd never find Xander.

"No, don't go in there," a servant said to a maid. "The king is dining with his son. They're almost done with their breakfast. You can clean it after."

At hearing that, I perked up and headed toward the room they were talking about. Two seconds later, Xander emerged, slamming the door behind him. He stormed past me, his face a mask of fury.

My heart pounded furiously as I hurried to keep up with his quick, determined strides. He marched up a set of stairs, and I followed along, trying to keep my feet light on the steps. At the top, we entered a private chamber. I slipped through the door just as it was closing.

Xander kicked and cursed, and I raised my brows—I'd never seen him so upset. He leaned over the dresser, pressing his palms flat against the surface. "*Damn him to hell,*" he muttered, shaking his head.

He straightened suddenly, peering over his shoulder, almost as if he suspected someone was in the room with him. "*Dragontooth,*" he whispered. The blue sword appeared, and he came after me so quickly, I barely had time to react. I stepped back, until I was up against the wall.

His blade, glowing a bright blue, was mere centimeters away from my throat. If he took even one step forward, I was dead. "Show yourself," he demanded.

Slowly, I reached for my hood, sliding the fabric away from my face and off of my head.

Xander's sword fell, clanking loudly against the stone floor. His face drained of all color, as if he were struck by the sight of me.

"*Sheridan?*"

I swallowed. "Hello, gladiator."

He dropped to his knees, shaking his head. "No, no, no. You *can't* be here."



“Why not?” I’d gone through a lot of trouble just to see him. He better not dare try to make me leave now.

He gazed up at me, terror in his deep blue eyes. “Because if they find you here, they’ll *kill* you.”

I kneeled down beside him, reaching for his face. “Who’s they, Xander? And why the hell didn’t you tell me you’re the hollowed prince?”

But he didn’t get a chance to answer.

Hollowed Guards began entering the room one by one, swords drawn. At their center, was an older man wearing a ruthless expression. Hate-filled, powerful magic radiated from him, smelling like metal and blood. “Seize the girl,” he said, glaring at me like I was a bug he wanted to squash under his boot.

*Small hiccup*, I thought, inwardly groaning. Everything would be fine. This was just another hiccup.

Okay, maybe not so small.

*Giant hiccup* was more like it.

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